

I am Lord Voldemort

by Nemesis

<http://www.pineapplegirl.net/thebelljar/ialv/>

1. The Boy Who Never Smiled

It was an in-between day. The air was chill, and the numerous clouds looked like lumpy porridge in the ice-grey sky. It should have been snowing, but the humidity was low. Tom could almost taste the dryness when he breathed sharply through his mouth, and it was an unpleasant feeling. He pulled his thin jacket tighter around him, shivering from head to toe. His breath hung mistily before him, mingling with the London fog. It was an hour after school on a Friday, and the orphans were all supposed to play outside to get rid of their excess energy.

Tom gazed at the frolicking children with a mixture of jealousy and loathing. Not one of the rosy, happy faces belonged to anyone who had ever been kind to him. Even the girls, looking so innocuous in their frilly dresses and pigtails, even they were worthy of abhorrence. Every one of them had, at one time or another, taken the time to kick Tom in the shins. The boys, however, made the girls look like baby rabbits. Tom knew they despised him, and he detested them right back.

At a glance, Tom Marvolo Riddle did not seem the kind of person who would provoke generic hatred. He was quite tall and spindly, and he had a rather lost, lonely look about him. He looked like he never got enough to eat, which was true. His orphanage uniform was far too short in the arm and leg, but it was also baggy, and it seemed to hang limply from his shoulders. Tom had jet-black hair that clearly needed a good trim, but it was his eyes that drew the attention. They were bright turquoise, almost unnatural in hue, and when framed by his dark eyelashes, they were no less than striking.

Most oddballs at Tom's orphanage were left to their own devices, but Tom was different from the average outcast. Tom knew that he was different, and though his peers were not quite clear on how special he was, the fact that he was odder than odd was enough to drive them. When they grew bored with football, the children would either verbally insult him or physically attack. It was not all harmless, either. Tom had once broken four bones when a boy named Gregory Hamill had shoved him down the stairs for a thrill.

On this freezing March afternoon, Tom was sitting near the bottom of the steps, shuffling his feet and rubbing his hands together in order to keep warm. He had foolishly left his book inside,

so he engaged himself in people-watching. Nearly all the faces made him want to strangle the faces' owners, though they all seemed relatively benign at the moment. Rather curiously, he noticed a new face. It was a girl with long golden hair and a huge blue silk ribbon on top of her head. She was not wearing a uniform, but a long fur cape and a velvet dress. Tom felt a pang of rage. He had always hated people who flaunted their wealth.

The girl was standing near the gate, scanning the multitudes of children. She was suddenly joined by two adults, a man and a woman, both with extremely high-class clothes. The threesome exchanged words, then started toward the orphanage entrance. Tom was suddenly aware that the rich girl was not an orphan, she was here with her family on some sort of business. Any respect he had had for the girl prior to this dissolved at that instant.

As the people reached the steps, Tom noticed that the woman had a large diamond on her finger and his anger heightened. "Pardon me, my lad," the father greeted in a pleasant enough voice, "but would you happen to know where Mr. Carney is?"

Tom knew perfectly well where Mr. Rupert Carney, the orphanage headmaster, was located. He was at the pub, probably on his fifth gin by now. However, Tom knew he would be dead if he told this to the strange family. "He went to town some two hours ago," Tom informed them. If he had known how to make his soft, frank voice at all saccharine, he would have done so. "Is there anything you need?"

"We are here to adopt a Muggle," the girl blurted. Her mother quickly shushed her, but the damage had been done. The parents tried to smooth it over.

"I understand completely," Tom replied. "It shouldn't be too hard for you to find a Muggle here, they're all over the place. In fact, I'm the only child in this orphanage who knows what a Muggle is."

The father did a small double take, staring at Tom's face with a most peculiar expression. "Are you Maria Salamair's son?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes," Tom sighed. For an instant, he looked more lost than ever, but he recovered himself quickly. "My name is Tom Riddle. Who are you?"

The man, bowing slightly, introduced himself. "I am Petricus Chubb. This is my wife, Bertha... my daughter, Lucy."

Tom had slightly warmed to the strangers once he realized they were his kind. "Where are my manners? Would you like to come in? You could have a cup of tea while you wait for Mr. Carney." Tom spat out the word "Carney" as though it was a hideous blasphemy.

"We'd love it," Mrs. Chubb smiled. Tom did not smile back, for he was still rather resentful that the Chubbs were so wealthy. He did, however, lead the Chubb family through the orphanage double doors, down the corridor, and into the sitting room beside Rupert Carney's office.

"Hannah might still be in the kitchen," Tom told the guests. "I'll just go ask her to get some tea going, shall I?" The Chubb family, who were seating themselves, nodded.

Hannah Hiddy, the housekeeper, was the only person at the orphanage, child or adult, who was ever kind to Tom. This was not surprising, for she, like Tom and the Chubbs, knew precisely what a Muggle was. Hannah was a wispy young woman with a very pretty face and a cloud of light brown hair. She had started working at the Whitechapel Home for Orphans when Tom was

four, and was like an aunt to him. Since she had learned Tom's secret, she had entertained a soft spot for the boy. Tom found her scouring pots.

"Hannah?" he asked tentatively. "There are some people in the sitting room who would like a cup of tea." Hannah looked up. Her face was unusually flushed, and she looked rather ill.

"Whom?" she inquired. Tom definitely noticed that she was breathless. "I really haven't the time, Tom, because with Muggles I can't use any... shortcuts..."

"They aren't Muggles, Hannah, they're like us," Tom responded impatiently. "Use all the magic you want, and I'll get those pots for you."

Hannah took this offer agreeably enough. She removed a wooden wand from the pocket of her apron and prodded the burner of the stove with it. Instantly, it warmed up. Hannah tapped her wand on the cupboard door, and a kettle whooshed out, landed in the sink, and filled itself before zooming across the room to the stove. Meanwhile, Tom scrubbed the pots and pans in the other basin of the sink, already beginning to regret his deal.

"Thank you ever so much for taking care of those, Tom," Hannah beamed as teabags flew across the room behind her back. "Usually I can handle Muggle cleaning, but lately, I've been feeling too dizzy to do some of it."

"Have you seen a doctor?" Tom asked, concerned.

Hannah waved a hand, dismissing the idea. "It's not that bad. Besides, I'm not going to entrust my health to some Muggle quack who doesn't know a magic wand from a chopstick." Tom, however, was not fooled. He had always been able to tell when people were lying to him, and Hannah was lying her head off. It *was* that bad, and Tom felt strongly inclined to turn Hannah's wand on her and force her to go and see a doctor. However, he finished the dishes in silence.

With the tea finished and the pots cleaned, Hannah and Tom returned to the sitting room, Hannah carrying the tea tray. Tom noticed rather uneasily that Hannah's breathing was very ragged. Mr. Chubb rose to greet them when they entered the chamber. "Why, is this little Hannah Hiddy?" he grinned. "You were in my House, remember?"

"Ravenclaw," Hannah responded, nodding. "Weren't you already a fifth-year by the time I got into Hogwarts, Petricus?"

"Sixth year, I think," Mr. Chubb replied. "I'm sure you've met Bertha. She was a fourth-year Hufflepuff, remember?"

"Yes." Hannah looked more ill than ever.

"We need to catch up, Hannah, we really do. Why don't you sit and have a cup of tea? You're welcome too, of course," he added to Tom, who had remained silent all this time. Hannah gazed longingly at a nearby armchair, but meekly stated that she had more work to do. However, Mr. Chubb insisted, and Hannah, sighing with relief, collapsed into the chair and poured herself a cup of tea.

As Mr. Chubb engaged Hannah in conversation, Lucy Chubb turned to Tom, who took up very little space indeed in his high-backed armchair. "So," she started, "are you going to Hogwarts?"

"Don't be silly, Lucy dear," Mrs. Chubb chortled good-naturedly. "With a witch like Maria Salamair for a mother, the boy is guaranteed to be a wizard!" Her daughter slumped in her chair

sulkily. Mrs. Chubb hijacked the conversation. "Are you here visiting Hannah, Tom?" she asked. Tom slowly shook his head, mouthing inaudibly. "Didn't catch that, sorry."

"I live here," Tom murmured, suddenly blinking rapidly. "Mother died two hours after I was born. She only lived long enough to name me."

Mrs. Chubb looked sympathetic. "Always thought she was too small to have children," she tutted. "What about your father?"

"Oh, *that*," Tom sneered, his demeanor changing completely. "He isn't in the picture. No, no, they were married," he threw in hastily, seeing the look of shock on the faces of the two Chubb females. "But he abandoned her before I was born because he found out Mother was a witch." Tom's teacup suddenly exploded, and tea splattered all over the room. Tom sat rigid in his chair, his right hand clenched around the armrest, breathing hard. Hannah cleared away the mess with a wave of her wand.

"Calm down, Tom," she commanded sharply. He relaxed his grip on the armrest, but was clearly not calm at all. He slouched in the corner of the chair, fuming. Lucy giggled, but was silenced by one look from Tom's eyes, which briefly seemed brighter than ever. Hannah handed him another teacup with a reprimanding look.

"Sorry," he mumbled after a while, if only to break the silence. "I got a bit carried away. You were saying, Mrs. Chubb?"

"Oh... er... well, my Lucy is starting at Hogwarts this year. She turns eleven in May, so she qualifies," Mrs. Chubb spluttered, clearly still rather shaken. "Are you going in the autumn, Tom?"

"Yes," he answered, "I had my birthday in December." Tom thought rather resentfully of that birthday. His only presents had been a card from his Muggle (non-magic) schoolteacher and a small, leather-bound diary he had bought for himself on Vauxhall Road and in which he had still not written.

"Really?" Lucy put in eagerly, before her mother could stop her. "Which House are you going for?" Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the most prestigious school of magic in the world, was divided into four Houses: Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Gryffindors were brave and daring, Hufflepuffs were sweet and pleasant, Ravenclaws were bookish and clever, and Slytherins were shrewd and ambitious.

One of Tom's deeper secrets, something not even Hannah knew about, was that Tom's mother had been a descendant of Salazar Slytherin, one of the four people who founded Hogwarts. The reason this was a secret was that almost every wizard who turned to the Dark Arts had passed through Slytherin house. Slytherins had a terrible reputation. Only the Salamair family, ironically, consisted entirely of good Slytherins. All the other pureblood, all-Slytherin families had churned out one Dark witch or wizard after another.

"I'm not sure," Tom replied slowly. "I don't think that you can try for a House, they just put you in it depending on your character and strengths. What about you, Lucy?"

Lucy blushed furiously. "Probably Gryffindor," she countered. "It sounds like the best of the lot." Tom's hands automatically balled up into fists. "Ravenclaw would be fine, though, and Hufflepuff would be great, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin! I would leave, or make them change it, wouldn't you? I mean, Slytherins are always really evil--"

"LUCY!" Mrs. Chubb pulled her daughter aside and whispered something into her ear. Lucy's eyes widened, and she glanced up at Tom, whose eyes were gleaming again. "I apologize on behalf of my daughter," she told him, "she was not aware of your family history. Your mother was a good woman. I knew her. Never spoke a word against anyone in her life." She glared at Lucy, who went sulky again.

Tom relaxed and looked around him. Mrs. and Lucy Chubb were having an argument. He quickly grew bored, watching them, so he turned to Hannah. However, she was still speaking to Mr. Chubb about their school days, and their talk was heavy with nostalgia. Tom rolled his eyes. He glanced at the window, and nearly choked on his tea. Strolling up the walk was none other than Rupert Carney. Mr. Carney was weaving slightly, and his clothes were wrinkled. Tom panicked and made for the exit.

"What's the matter, Tom?" Hannah started to say, but she heard Mr. Carney enter and her question was answered. "It's too late, Tom, you'll meet him right outside the door. Here--" she got to her feet, wincing, and threw open a closet "--you can hide in this. I'll get him out of here as soon as possible and give you the all clear." Tom stumbled into the closet, treading on several boxes. Mr. Carney paused outside the door, apparently because of the noises he heard.

"Who's in there?" he hollered. Hannah shut the closet door almost all the way, but left it slightly ajar so that Tom could see out of it. The Chubbs were looking completely bewildered.

"Why are you hiding--"

"Sh!" Hannah commanded. Her eyes darted over to the closet. She looked as terrified as Tom felt. Hannah let Mr. Carney in. "Oh, Mr. Carney, you're back! I've just finished giving the Chubb family their tea... they're here to adopt--"

"I'll handle this," Mr. Carney sneered coldly. "Get back to work." Hannah shot Tom a helpless, fleeting look before she headed back to the kitchens. Tom started to wonder how he had come to be in this situation. Mr. Carney spotted Mr. Chubb's regalia and changed his tone to an oily one. Tom noticed distastefully that Mr. Carney had obviously not washed his colorless hair in a week or two; the grease seemed to be dripping off it.

"You must be the Chubb family?" he greeted, his voice easily as slimy as his hair.

"Yes," Mr. Chubb responded eagerly, standing and shaking Mr. Carney's hand. "I am Petricus Chubb, and this is my family: my wife Bertha and my daughter Lucy. We are interested in adopting a child."

"That can be arranged. What age and gender of child are you looking for?" Mr. Carney looked like a sallow, hook-nosed salesman preparing for a large purchase.

"A boy, probably somewhere around six," Mrs. Chubb replied. "We prefer that he is a gifted child who has just learned to read." Tom stifled a snort. He did not think that a child who learned to read at age six was all that gifted.

"I shall assemble all of the six-year-old males for you, and you can decide which you will adopt." He sounded like he was advertising a sale of puppies. Mrs. Chubb shivered suddenly. "Are you cold?" Mr. Carney asked. ("SUCK UP!" Tom coughed softly into his hands.) "Here, there are some sweaters in the closet." Mr. Carney reached for the doorknob. Tom's stomach seemed to turn over.

"I don't need one," Mrs. Chubb insisted firmly, glancing at the half of Tom's face that she could see.

"If you'll give me a few minutes, I'll be back with the children, and you can speak to each of them separately." Tom sighed with relief as Rupert Carney headed for the door, but just then, a terrible thing happened. The box Tom was standing on collapsed from his weight, and Tom toppled out of the closet with a clatter. Several other boxes came out with him, some of which crunched as glass items inside shattered. Doom seemed to hit him in the face, or perhaps it was the hardwood floor.

Someone seized the back of his collar and pulled him up. Tom found himself staring into Mr. Carney's livid face. His breath smelled strongly of gin. "What were you doing in there, boy?" he snarled, resuming his usual cold voice.

Tom thought fast, knowing that it would go over horribly if he told Mr. Carney the truth. "Playing hide-and-seek," he lied silkily. Tom had two talents involving mendacity: detecting it and performing it.

"How long have you been in there?"

"About an hour. I suppose nobody thought to come and look for me inside. Boy, when I get back out there, they are going to be so mad that I fooled them!" Tom forced his voice into a syrupy, childish treble.

"Orphans are not allowed in here," Mr. Carney whispered, so that the Chubbs would not hear. "You know that perfectly well. Go to your dormitory, and I'll deal with you later." Mr. Carney twisted Tom's right wrist sharply as he pretended to help Tom up, then shooed him away.

Tom made off as fast as he could for the dormitory. He knew Mr. Carney too well to think that he had half a chance of getting off. As he strode up the stairs, he could practically feel the belt on his back already. Tom shuddered convulsively, half with apprehension and half with insuppressible rage.

He found Hannah cleaning in his dormitory. She looked terribly pale, with her hair all over her face. She brightened when she saw her friend. "Did the Chubbs manage to get you out?" she asked. Tom threw himself onto his bunk, moaning. He explained what happened, and Hannah blanched to an even paler tone.

"Funny, that," Tom stated grimly. "I've looked that scummy Muggle in the face for eleven damned years. I should be used to having the stuffing lashed out of me by now. Nonetheless, sometimes I just want to..." Tom trailed off, turning to Hannah. "Can I borrow your wand?" he joked. "I want to try out the Cruciatus Curse on Rupert Carney."

Hannah's eyes flashed. "That isn't funny," she snapped, her mild temper flaring up for that rare occasion. "The Cruciatus Curse is one of the Three Unforgivable Curses, performing it just once could land you in Azkaban."

"Anywhere but here, Hannah," Tom sighed absently. "Anywhere but here." He reached up toward the top of his bunk and ran one long finger along the canvas. "Will you sit with me awhile, Hannah, before...?"

"Of course." Hannah set down her feather duster and sat on Tom's bed. "What do you want to talk about?"

Tom sighed heavily, still tracing the pattern on the canvas with his fingers. "Could you tell me about my mother, Hannah?"

Hannah took a deep breath, struggling to remember the older schoolgirl she had known. Maria Salamair took many words to explain. Slowly, she went into the description. Hannah started with appearance, dwelling on how Maria so resembled her son. She had had long blue-black hair in silky ringlets, with the same high cheekbones and almond-shaped, turquoise eyes. "She sang like a bluebird, and her laugh... God, you should have heard her laugh. It was like silver bells were ringing all around you," Hannah murmured, her hand still on Tom's forehead. "And such a character! She was nearly always happy, carefree... the only time she was ever sad was when her father Marvolo died, and it was awful to see. Almost like watching an angel cry."

After half an hour, Hannah was once again lost in memories, and Tom had turned away from Hannah, blinking uncontrollably. Both of them were jerked out of their respective states by a bang upon the door. Tom felt the fight-or-flight reflex kicking in already. Rupert Carney hurled the door open, spotted Tom, and curled his lip with dislike.

"Riddle," he growled, spitting it out in precisely the manner that Tom spoke the word "Carney." "You are holding up Miss Hiddy. Miss Hiddy, for the last time, GET BACK TO WORK!" Hannah resumed her dusting promptly, pretending not to eavesdrop.

"As for you, Riddle," Mr. Carney continued, "you are in very serious trouble."

"For playing hide-and-seek in a closet?" Tom asked, once more forcing his voice to be sugary. "I did not know there was anything wrong with--"

"For entering an area that is off-limits to all orphans, particularly you. For breaking several very expensive Christmas ornaments. For listening in on a classified conversation. For being inside during the recreation time. For these reasons, and for the simple fact that I do not like you, Riddle, you are in trouble."

"I wasn't aware your personal preferences had anything to do with justice," Tom retorted, his voice barely a whisper, all false sweetness forgotten. "My, my, Carney, aren't you getting full of yourself, thinking your opinion means so much? Next minute, you'll be signing a treaty with Adolf Hitler and slaughtering all the turquoise-eyed freaks in Europe."

Mr. Carney purpled. "How dare you--idiot boy--piece of filth!" Mr. Carney seized Tom's arm. "You'll pay for that!"

Hannah gave him a what-did-you-say-that-for kind of look, which was laced with pure pity. Tom did not much mind. He would have been punished anyway, the slur meant only a couple more lashes than he would have had in the first place. Mr. Carney dragged Tom down two flights of stairs into the basement, flung him into a small room, and exited briefly. Tom knew this room well. It was called the Wailing Room by the orphans, and all of them had seen the inside of it at least once in their young lives. Tom had been in the Wailing Room more than any other child, and had every inch of wall memorized. It was a desolate room with bars on the only window. The only furnishing was a ratty old twin bed, and there were numerous, unpleasantly bloody-looking stains on the floor, wall, and even the ceiling. Tom sat down on the bed, staring straight ahead of him.

He heard Mr. Carney re-enter the room and draw the shades, but did not turn to look. He concentrated on a particularly splatty stain, trying not to think of how it got there, just observing its color. "Take off your upper things, you know the drill," Mr. Carney barked. Tom removed his

jacket and shirt, still staring at the stain. He shivered; the basement was drafty, and his undershirt was doing very little to keep him warm.

Tom heard Mr. Carney raise the belt, and Tom braced himself, still staring straight ahead. The belt made sudden contact, and Tom bit his lip, his shoulders searing. It was quickly followed by another lash, and another, and another... Tom quickly lost count. He tried to focus all his energy on not crying out, or showing any signs of his agony, for that was what Mr. Carney wanted. Restraint, however, was coming harder with every crack.

"THAT--IS--FOR--THE--EMBARRASSMENT--YOU--CAUSED--ME--IN--FRONT--OF--THE--CHUBBS!" Mr. Carney roared. He finally stopped, panting, and looked around at Tom's face. "No tears?" he cried, sounding quite disappointed. "I'll get you to blubber. You've yet to pay for insulting me, boy!"

The belt impacted again, and Tom let out an involuntary gasp of pain. Not only was Mr. Carney hitting harder than ever, but he was using the end with the buckle. Somehow, Mr. Carney managed to hit exactly the same area every time. After several blows, Tom could not help it. He screamed at the top of his lungs, praying that a neighbor would hear and call the police. Someone at the back of his mind reminded him that Mr. Carney was doing nothing illegal, he was allowed to discipline his charges, but Tom did not care. He shouted as loudly as he could, though this seemed to just encourage Mr. Carney. After what seemed like hours, Mr. Carney relented, and Tom collapsed, whimpering softly into the musty quilt of the old bed.

"Never insult me again," Mr. Carney snarled, rolling up the belt as he rose to leave the Wailing Room. "Never, do you hear me?"

Tom, his face shiny and flushed, glared up at Mr. Carney, a tic going in his right shoulder and his eyes blazing. He hissed something in what was clearly another language, and though Carney did not understand a word of it, he could tell it was an insult. "That's one day you're staying in here, Riddle, and no meals!" he snapped. "Throw in an extra hour for whatever the hell it was you just called me." He stormed out of the room and slammed the door.

Tom heard muffled voices out in the main basement area, accompanied by high-pitched laughter. Three seconds later, Gregory Hamill, Tom's archenemy, poked his head in. "Heard you got the brains knocked out of you, Riddle," he giggled, his attractive face splitting into a wide grin. "A whole day, eh? Don't worry, we're already planning a welcome back party for when you get out of there. Besides, you aren't going to get out of Sunday School, and this week's lesson is going to be *fascinating*."

"Aren't you supposed to be off drinking the blood of mortals, Hamill?" Tom snapped. Gregory only smirked more widely, and he slammed the door. Once he was sure he was alone, Tom reached up and felt his back. His undershirt seemed damp, and was stuck to his skin. Tom winced at the slight pressure of his fingers, so he quickly drew his hand away. His fingertips were smeared with blood. Tom flinched and buried his face in the pillow.

2. The Snake and the Owl

At dinner on Saturday, Tom emerged, heavily bandaged, from the Wailing Room, a look of intense agony chiseled into his face. He seemed to have grown even more saturnine during his stay, and even Gregory Hamill was tactful enough to leave him be for the moment. Tom seated himself at the head of one of the tables and ate his meager rations rapidly, wincing once in a while if he moved his arm too quickly.

Tom glared mutinously up at Rupert Carney's private table, where he was eating hearty helpings of fillet mignon and mashed potatoes. "Who the hell does he think he is?" Tom murmured to himself. He had spent the better part of his time in the Wailing Room in anguish, every second cursing the moment that Rupert Carney was born. Tom was suddenly hit by a morbid but eerily satisfying vision of Mr. Carney lying at his feet, writhing in pain, while Tom stood over him with a wand.

At this moment, all four legs of Mr. Carney's chair snapped, and he toppled onto the floor. Tom, his face slightly red, turned back to his stew, keeping his eyes down so that Mr. Carney would not suspect him. A burst of laughter rang through the dining hall, but it was quickly stifled as Mr. Carney, livid with anger, scrambled to his feet, his pale comb-over falling into his monochromatic eyes. He lifted his hand and pointed a stubby finger in Tom's direction. "Riddle!" he shrieked. Mashed potato was stuck to his jaw, and his face had gone from sallow to a deep crimson.

Tom stared silently back, his blood boiling, but his face scarcely showing it. "Yes, sir?" Tom replied innocently. Hannah, standing in the kitchen doorway, had her face buried in her hands.

Mr. Carney looked about ready to defenestrate somebody. "Out with it, Riddle, what did you do?" He was breathing hard through his clenched, crooked teeth, and his nostrils were flared.

"I'm on the other side of the room, sir. How could I possibly have done something to you from over here?" Tom forced himself to keep eye contact.

Mr. Carney had to accept this, but he kept on giving Tom funny looks as the boy carried his dishes into the kitchen.

Tom may have been imagining it, but Mr. Carney seemed to be in a horrible temper with him over the next four months. Tom did his best to stay out of the way, but harder to avoid were Gregory and his friends. They kept pulling him aside and whispering that they were still working on their plan, never stating what their plan was. Tom was strongly suspicious that this plan of theirs involved some new way to make him miserable.

Meanwhile, Hannah's illness seemed to be getting worse. After a while, she began to use magic with almost every chore, and had trouble standing up for more than five minutes on end. One afternoon in early June, Tom found that she had actually fallen asleep while washing dishes. When Tom tapped her shoulder, she woke up sharply and began scrubbing frantically. It took her a full minute to notice Tom standing there, looking very worried indeed. "See a doctor, Hannah," he commanded.

"I'm not ill, why should I go to the doctor?" Hannah yawned.

"You *are* ill, Hannah, stop tergiversating!" Tom snapped, folding his arms and glaring at her. "Why won't you admit it?"

Hannah hesitated, staring at Tom intently. "I just made some zucchini bread," she announced loudly. "Do you want a piece? It's lovely warm."

Tom opened his mouth to answer, but Hannah stuffed a piece of the spicy bread into his mouth and went back to work. Tom gave up on Hannah and stormed out of the kitchen and up to his dormitory, exasperated. Rather irritably, he seized a book from his dresser and dashed down the stairs. As he burst through the orphanage doors, he thought he had walked into the wrong place. Instead of laughing and playing, three-quarters of the orphans were standing in a semicircle, whispering excitedly. Gregory and his closest friends were standing in the very middle.

"What is this?" Tom demanded, his quiet voice icy with suspicion.

"A surprise, Riddle," Gregory sneered, stepping forward. "We've been planning this for months, all for the one event."

Tom made to sneak back up the steps, but the semicircle tightened into a circle, blocking his path. He turned to face Gregory again. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm sick of attacking when you're down, Riddle," Gregory snarled, his face forming a demented smile. "Shoving you down the steps... throwing rocks at you... dumping water on you from stair landings... It's all fun, of course, but frankly, if there's no resistance, it gets a little boring." Tom bit his lip and got ready to run. He was not sure what was going to happen, but he knew he was not going to enjoy it. Gregory took another step forward, his round grey eyes twinkling with anticipation.

"What, you've finally decided to leave me alone?" Tom retorted. He tucked the book into the inside pocket of his jacket and folded his arms protectively over his chest.

The maniacal smile had still not left Gregory's mouth. "No, Riddle," he spat. "I'm going to fight you when you have your guard up. I'm going to prove to the world that I'm the bigger man--" (here Tom rolled his eyes, for Gregory was at least a head shorter) "--by fighting you properly. I am going to fight you, and you are going to fight back, and I am going to prove that I can beat Tom Riddle, even when he knows I'm about to do it."

"It took you only four months to come up with that idea?" Tom scoffed. "Quite the brain you are, Gregory."

"That's not it," Gregory insisted defensively. "If I win, these kids get a free-for-all. Same thing happens if I lose, for that matter. Either way, you're going down, Riddle." He was now circling Tom with a look of smug satisfaction on his face.

Once more, Tom hissed a series of quick, furious words in some language other than English, and Gregory stared at him. "What was that you just said, Riddle?" he barked.

Tom broke into a run, but was promptly shoved back into the circle by a burly older boy. "I asked you a question," Gregory roared. "Answer it!"

Tom shook his head and prepared for the first blow, but it never came. Gregory's fist had come within a foot of Tom's stomach before it skidded to a halt. Gregory was staring at the ground. Tom looked down too. A snake about a quarter of the size of a garden hose had slithered from the nearby brush, its back arched, glaring up at Gregory. "You called, Masssster?" the snake greeted Tom, speaking in the same, swift language.

Tom stared at the snake in surprise. "What do you--you can talk to me?"

"What do you think that language is?" the snake replied.

"I don't know. I just thought it was something of my own, even though it always sounded like English in my head. Hannah thinks it's gibberish."

"It'sss Parssssseltongue," the snake informed him, "and you are a Parssssselmouth. But right now, I have to help you."

Gregory Hamill was backing away from the snake, shaking uncontrollably. "Afraid of snakes, are you?" Tom asked. He turned to the snake. "Go for him, friend."

"Yesss, Masssster," the snake agreed, nodding. With that, he dove for Gregory, snapping at his ankles. Gregory screamed for help, and Tom just stood there, giving the snake instructions. The orphans were in a panic, and the circle had dispersed. Gregory's best friend Bartholomew Werner was making a beeline up the steps, but Tom did not notice.

"His arm's near the ground, go up his sleeve!" he shouted at the snake. "That's it, now bite his ear! Are you poisonous? No? Damn. Oh well, bite him anyway!" Gregory shrieked with terror and pain, trying to shake the snake off. Tom kept staring at Gregory, seething. This was his chance to get back at Gregory for everything. The snake came out of his collar and twirled around his arm several times, nipping his fingers playfully. "That will do, my friend," Tom cried in Parsel tongue. "Return to me. He has learned his lesson." The snake fell to the grass and crossed over to Tom, who picked it up and put it on his shoulder. It looped itself around his neck and continued to look daggers at Gregory.

Bartholomew reappeared at Gregory's side, staring at Tom and the snake. "I had better go," the snake whispered. "That new boy has notified your guardian. If you ever need assssissstance, little Masssster, be sure to call for it. Any of ussss sssnakesss would be willing to help you." The snake slid down Tom's arm and disappeared into the bushes.

"Thank you!" Tom called after it.

At that instant, Mr. Carney emerged from the orphanage and hurried down the steps to where Gregory was standing. "What happened?" Mr. Carney asked, looking as though he already did not believe the story.

"Mr. Carney," Gregory gasped, his breath coming in short, deep bursts. "I was talking to Tom Riddle, and he said something funny."

"Riddle has a sense of humor?" Mr. Carney looked even more disbelieving. Tom glared at him.

"No, he said something weird, in an odd language, and all of a sudden this huge snake came out of the bushes!" Gregory spluttered, pointing at the myrtle bush. "Riddle talked to the snake with his funny language, and the snake attacked me! Riddle kept on yelling at it, and every time he said something, the snake would do something else!"

Mr. Carney looked up at Tom, his face contorted. Tom could see that Mr. Carney's shrunken mind had drawn a blank. He clearly thought the story was complete rot, but here he had the chance to punish Tom Riddle, the boy he detested above all others. Eventually, to Tom's dismay, sadism won over logic. "Riddle," he muttered, "explain yourself."

"Are you suggesting, sir, that I have the ability to communicate with snakes?" Tom asked in a faux-scrupulous voice. "If you are, sir, perhaps you should take into account the absurdity--"

"I am suggesting nothing, Riddle," Mr. Carney growled. "Follow me." He closed his hand around Tom's left wrist and twisted it sharply. Tom flinched. He was left-handed, and this would mean that writing would be painful for at least a week.

Mr. Carney tried to lead Tom away, but Tom rooted his feet to the ground. There was no way he was taking another beating, not when he had been in the right. "I said follow me, boy," Carney said, his voice dangerously tense. "You will do as I say." Mr. Carney marched around to the back door, half pulling, half dragging Tom along with him.

He hurled Tom into the Wailing Room and hovered in the doorway. "That's ten days you've earned yourself, Riddle, and be grateful it isn't more than that. One meal every two days; it's far more than you deserve."

"You aren't going to beat me?" Tom cried in disbelief.

"Not today. I haven't the time today. The Chubbs are finalizing their adoption of Derek Pritchard." Tom struggled to remember who Derek Pritchard was. Was he that scrawny, runny-nosed little blond boy who was always asking Tom to play kick-the-can? Yes, that was it. Tom wondered vaguely why the Chubb family had picked Derek. "If you're lucky, I'll forget about beating you at all, but I wouldn't bank on that."

"I'll get dirty," Tom scorned, looking at Mr. Carney's slimy hair. Tom was one of only about four children in the orphanage who held any store by personal hygiene.

"Don't push your luck, Riddle," Mr. Carney snarled. He turned on his heel and left Tom to his very relieved thoughts.

On the fifth day, Tom woke up early. It appeared that Mr. Carney had forgotten about Tom's beating. Indeed, he seemed to have put it out of his mind that Tom even existed. As Hannah had pointed out as she had brought him his last meal, Mr. Carney had even found a new scapegoat. To Tom's delight, it was Gregory Hamill. Apparently, Mr. Carney thought Gregory was a bit off-balance because he kept insisting Tom could talk to snakes. Tom had neglected to tell Hannah that he was a Parselmouth, thinking it might upset her.

Tom walked into the adjacent half-bathroom and stood before the mirror. As far as grime was concerned, Tom was starting to look Carneyish. Disgusted, Tom filled the basin with water and washed up, bumping his elbow badly when he tried to remove the dirt from his hair. Tom had always taken an unusual interest in staying clean, probably because he was constantly surrounded by dirty people.

Tom's stomach rumbled loudly. He still had twenty-four hours to go before his next meal, unless Hannah managed to sneak him something before then. Tom collapsed onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling, trying to ignore the hunger pangs in his stomach. To pass the time, he sat up, pulled a small bundle out of his inside jacket pocket, and separated the items. The bundle was comprised of two articles. One was the four-page letter his mother had written to him before he was born, all about his heritage, his talents, and his father. Tom was the only one who had ever read the letter. In fact, he had taught himself how to read with that very letter when he was thirteen months old.

The second item was a wizard photograph of his mother and her best friend in their late teens. As was characteristic with magical photographs, the subjects were moving. Maria Salamair kept on hugging her friend, Charlie Digby, tightly around the neck, while Charlie laughed and tried to shove her away. Tom's mother looked remarkably like him; tall, spindly, and attractive. Charlie was also tall, but he was athletically built and fair-haired. Tom did not know anything about him except what his mother had written on the back of the photograph: "*Me (Maria Salamair, Slyth.) in my 6th year, w/ best friend Charlie Digby, Gryff., 7th year.*"

Tom looked from the photograph to the letter. Apart from Hannah's stories, these were all he had to tell him about his mother. Tom watched the photograph with interest as Maria and Charlie seized sticks from the ground and began to feign a Muggle duel, laughing uncontrollably. He could even hear the sticks clapping together. However, the duel stopped, and the tapping noise continued. Tom's eyes shot up from the photograph, and he looked wildly around for the source of the sound. The only thing moving was something outside the window, and it was tapping on the bars fiercely. Upon closer observation, Tom recognized it as a barn owl.

Tom immediately thought back to the calendar on his wall. He quickly deduced that it was June twelfth. Cursing himself for forgetting, Tom rushed to the window and jammed it open. The owl landed softly on the grass, gazing at Tom with large, dark eyes. "Are you a Hogwarts owl?" Tom asked eagerly. The owl responded by holding out a talon, which held a rolled-up envelope. "Yes! All right, hang on." Tom slipped one of his slender hands through the bars. "Can you put that in my hand, owl?" The owl placed its foot in Tom's hand and released the letter. The owl's foot was very warm compared to Tom's hand, which was freezing.

"Thank you," Tom said appreciatively. "I'll go get something for you. Back in a flash!" The owl hooted and stayed where it was. Tom searched frantically for a scrap of food, finally finding a bit of stale sandwich crust. "Hope you like tuna fish and pickles," Tom sighed apologetically. The owl, however, seemed grateful, and it nibbled his thumb before taking off.

With the owl gone, Tom eagerly sat on his bed. The envelope was made of yellow parchment, and was held together by a large, purple wax seal. The seal was imprinted with a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake, all around a capital H. On the other side, Tom found the address.

*Mr. T. M. Riddle
The Wailing Room, Whitechapel Home for Orphans
Whitechapel, London, England*

Tom promptly broke the seal and opened the envelope. Two sheets of parchment fell into his lap. He seized the letter and read it, his heart beating a mile a minute.

Dear Mr. Riddle,

It is my great pleasure to inform you that you have been accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Term begins on September 1st, 1943. You will need to catch the 11:00 Hogwarts Express on Platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross Station on that day. A list of school items has been enclosed.

Give my regards to Hannah Hiddy. Tell her, from me, that I still wear those socks she knitted for me in her fourth year, and they are still the most comfortable socks I have.

Yours Truly,

*Professor Albus Dumbledore
Deputy Headmaster*

As though on cue, Hannah entered the room at that moment. She saw Tom sitting on the bed with his back turned, and immediately anticipated the worst: that Mr. Carney had not forgotten about the beating after all. "Tom?" she said gently. "Are you all right?"

Tom turned to face her, and Hannah nearly fainted. Tom Riddle, the boy who was well known for being perpetually gloomy, was beaming. His eyes were alive with happiness. Hannah found the effect slightly alarming, and she staggered backward a few steps. "I made it in!" he whispered. "I did it." Before Hannah could ask what he meant, he brandished the papers at her, smiling still wider. "Professor Dumbledore wants me to tell you he still wears those socks you gave him," Tom added as an afterthought. "But Hannah, Hannah, Hannah, I did it! I DID IT!" Tom grabbed Hannah's forearms and danced around the room. He seemed to be possessed by a new energy Hannah had never seen before.

"Tom--calm down--" Hannah sank onto the bed, exhausted, her face whiter than snow. Tom did not mind. He continued to spin around the room like a top, singing impromptu. Hannah noticed that he sang as well as his mother, if not better. "Tom, stop!" she commanded, though reluctant to stop listening to his voice. "If you keep on at that level, Mr. Carney will wake up and he'll come down here." Tom stopped singing immediately at mention of Mr. Carney, and he halted in mid-spin.

"Can we go shopping for my school things?" Tom asked eagerly after the awkward silence.

"We'll go in a couple of hours," Hannah replied. "I'll have to sneak you out, though. I brought you some breakfast," she added, indicating the bowl of porridge in her hands, which had slopped around an awful lot while Hannah had been spinning around the room.

"Thank you, Hannah," Tom said, the grin lingering on his face.

After Tom had finished his breakfast, Hannah took out her wand and tidied Tom up a bit (he still had soap suds in his hair, and his uniform was caked with dirt). Hannah disappeared briefly, and when she re-entered, she had good news. "Mr. Carney is still asleep, Tom," she informed him. "Hurry, now, we can get out through the back door."

3. Diagon Alley

The Leaky Cauldron was located in the more shell-shocked area of London, where they were still having air raids on occasion. Tom stared around the ruins of various buildings, amazed at how the block resembled a mouth with missing teeth. Some structures would be entirely intact, while one right beside it would be completely demolished. The few people out on the street kept glancing nervously at the sky, and though it was quite a warm day, Tom shivered.

"Well, this is it," Hannah said simply. "This is the Leaky Cauldron. Very famous place." She indicated the only building on the street that looked at all warm or inviting. Tom followed Hannah into it, casting a grim eye around the street before entering. The Leaky Cauldron was a small and somewhat dingy little inn, but it was packed with witches and wizards. A pre-teenaged witch in a flowered, pointed hat began whispering excitedly to her friend as she spotted Tom, and the two of them stared at him gleefully.

"Hannah!" the bartender grinned. He was in his thirties, and he had very bad teeth, which made Tom shudder with obsessive-compulsive aversion. "Here for a butterbeer?"

Hannah shook her head. "I'm going out back, George. Taking Tom to do his Hogwarts shopping." Hannah's hand tightened on Tom's shoulder. George scrutinized Tom through his pince-nez spectacles.

"So this is Tom Riddle," he remarked approvingly. "I can see why you go on about him so, Hannah. He looks like a nice kid." George looked back at Tom, who dropped his gaze sharply, his shyness already beginning to creep up on him. "You must be the tallest one in your class," George chuckled. "Play Quidditch, Tommy?"

Tom flinched. He hated being called Tommy, probably because one of Gregory Hamill's favorite insults was "Tommy Salami." "No," Tom answered, still staring at his ancient shoelaces.

"Better get going, then," Hannah exclaimed. "Come along, Tom, there's a lad." She marched him out the back door of the inn. Tom heard the young witches behind him whisper and giggle, and he flushed with embarrassment.

The back lot of the Leaky Cauldron was blocked all around by an old brick wall. Hannah took out her wand and tapped one of the bricks. Tom gave out a cry of shock as the wall dissolved, revealing an arched doorway. "Follow me," Hannah commanded, not unkindly. Tom's mind was going a mile a minute. They had walked out into a long street bathed in sunlight. The lane seemed to have a golden glow around it, and the sight of it made Tom want to run along and look in every shop.

After a brief visit to Gringotts, the wizard bank, Tom removed his school list from his pocket.

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)
2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon's hide or similar)
4. One winter cloak (any color acceptable, metal fastenings)
5. One robe sash (any color acceptable)

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1 by Miranda Goshawk
A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot

Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling
One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore
Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger
Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander
A History of the Dark Arts by Viktor Berger

OTHER EQUIPMENT

1 wand
1 cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)
1 set glass crystal phials
1 set brass scales
1 telescope
2 quills (eagle feather or similar)
10 rolls of parchment (minimum)
Students may also bring an owl, cat, toad, or any other small animal. Students are reminded, however, that bats, tarantulas, and flesh-eating slugs are not allowed.

PARENTS SHOULD REMEMBER THAT FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS.

"I'll take care of the books for you, Tom," Hannah said, taking the list. "You can go into Madam Malkin's Robe Shop and buy your school uniform. This should be enough to cover the charges." She pressed several golden coins into Tom's hand and disappeared into a bookshop called Flourish and Blott's. Tom headed into the shop directly adjacent to it, butterflies fluttering around his stomach. He hated talking to adults, they made him nervous.

A tiny bell rang somewhere when Tom entered the shop. Madam Malkin, a very young woman with flyaway brown hair, turned around to look at him. "Hello, my dear," she breezed, gliding across the room. "Are you here for your Hogwarts shopping?" Tom nodded, and Madam Malkin smiled at him. She led Tom into a back room, where two other children were being fitted. One was a pasty boy with a pointed face and dark brown hair, and the other was a girl with white-gold hair and an extremely attractive visage.

"My, you've long arms and legs!" Madam Malkin informed Tom after measuring him. "Don't worry, though, we'll fit you properly." She bustled off to find some black robes. The two strange children turned to him.

"Hogwarts?" asked the brown-haired boy.

"Yes. I'm starting this year."

"So am I," the boy replied. His voice had a bored, conceited drawl to it, which Tom disliked immensely. "The name's Malfoy. Francis Malfoy." He waved an uninterested hand in the direction of the blonde girl, who promptly tossed her hair haughtily. "That's Ambika Dawes," he informed Tom. "She's starting this year, too."

"What is your name?" Ambika queried, her proud blue eyes roving from Tom's dingy shoes up to his nervous face. She was practically guffawing her disapproval.

"Tom Riddle." Tom had the sudden urge to slap Ambika silly to stop her from sniggering at him.

"I don't believe I've heard of your family," Francis drawled. "You aren't a Muggle-born, are you?" he added, wrinkling his nose with distaste.

Tom glared right back into Francis's cold, grey eyes. "I am half-blooded," he said softly. He was finding it harder and harder not to dislike this boy.

"Oh, really?" Francis's nose remained slightly scrunched. "Well, I'm pure-blooded, and Ambika is too, if you can count a veela mother as being a witch." Tom whirled on Ambika, who was smiling smugly. Hannah had once explained to him that veela were beautiful but unpleasant creatures, originating in Bulgaria and possessing a strange power over humans, particularly males. Tom eyed Ambika with curiosity, but he did not feel at all bewitched. Perhaps half-veela were not as strong, he mused.

Madam Malkin turned up a few seconds later with a set of robes. Tom tried them on, discovering quickly that they were too baggy. "That's no problem, dear," said Madam Malkin good-naturedly. She tapped the hem of the robes with her wand, and they were immediately a perfect fit. "So that's three in this size, Annamae," she told her assistant, folding up the robe. Tom selected a hat, a forest green cloak with silver fastenings and brocades, and an emerald-colored robe sash embroidered in silver threads.

"Going for Slytherin?" Ambika laughed derisively, picking out a cloak of frosty sky-blue. "They don't usually accept Mudbloods, you know." Tom pretended not to hear, concentrating on Madam Malkin, who was enchanting the fingers of his gloves so that they were long enough to accommodate his lanky hands. He paid for his purchases and hurried out of the store, laden with bags. Hannah met him outside, looking ill but happy.

"I have your books," she said, "and I bought your cauldron and phials at the Apothecary. You must have had a time in the fitting room, Tom."

Tom made a loud "tuh" and hustled past her, clutching the bags in his arms. "I'm not very easy to fit," he retorted shortly. The snobbish children in the robe shop had put him in a bad temper, and he was not particularly talkative as he and Hannah acquired his telescope, scales, quills, and parchment. He finally explained what had happened, and Hannah frowned slightly.

"I wouldn't take a Malfoy seriously," Hannah snorted. "They're bad blood through and through. Francis's grandfather is in Azkaban for spying with Grindelwald." Tom cocked his head in interest. Grindelwald was an Austrian wizard who was currently wreaking havoc in the Caucasus region. Many a great wizard had fallen because of him, and he was considered an active threat even by British witches and wizards.

"Thing is," Hannah continued, "the Malfoy family is so stuck-up that they won't even give a half-blood the time of day. A lot of wizard families hate Muggle-borns, but only a Malfoy will also turn his back on a half-blood." Tom shot a glance across the street. Francis was coming out of the Magical Menagerie with a large screech owl on his shoulder. He was flanked by his pallid-looking parents, who were doting on him fondly. Tom sneered and turned away.

Now, all that was left was Tom's wand, which Hannah insisted Tom buy on his own. "I have to do some of my own shopping at the Apothecary," she informed him when he asked for an explanation. Sighing heavily, Tom dragged himself into Ollivander's Wandshop, praying he would not meet any other unsavory children inside. Ollivander's was dusty and dimly lit inside, its walls lined with hundreds of boxes. The only furnishings were a desk and a chair, and the light was coming from an open door near the back of the room. The shopkeeper was nowhere to be seen, so Tom sat down in the rickety chair and waited. To his luck, there were no other children about.

Tom did not have to wait for very long. A man about Tom's height with greying hair and silver eyes emerged from the back room and placed a box in one of the empty shelf spaces. Tom stood up to greet him. "Are you Mr. Ollivander?" he asked.

The silver-eyed man turned around and noticed Tom for the first time. "Yes," he responded after a long silence. "Ah, you are starting at Hogwarts." He swept forward and looked into Tom's face.

Mr. Ollivander's eyes narrowed suddenly, and he examined Tom more closely. "Are you Maria Salamair's son?" he inquired.

"Yes. I'm Tom Riddle." Tom stared into Mr. Ollivander's eyes. What an unusual color, more than a little mysterious. Then again, Tom thought, his own eyes were not particularly normal themselves.

Mr. Ollivander's face broke into a smile. "I sold your mother her wand," Mr. Ollivander proclaimed. "Ten-and-a-quarter inches long, cherry and unicorn hair, rather supple. An excellent wand for transfiguration, that was. Now we shall see which wand suits you the best." Mr. Ollivander removed a stack of boxes from a shelf. "Which is your wand hand, Tom Riddle?"

"My left," Tom stated immediately. Mr. Ollivander gave him an odd, calculating look, but Tom chose to ignore it.

"Let's see..." Mr. Ollivander reached into the first box. "We'll try this first. Willow and unicorn hair, nine inches, whippy. Take it in your hand--" (here Mr. Ollivander flinched as Tom lifted the wand left-handed) "--and give it a good wave." Tom obeyed, but to no avail. The wand showed no sign of life. "How about this. Holly and dragon heartstring, twelve-and-a-quarter inches, bendy. Try."

This wand was unsuccessful as well. Tom went through seven stacks of boxes over the next hour, and none of the wands worked. By the bottom of the seventh stack, Tom's shoulder was killing him from all the waving, and he felt so exasperated that he wanted to jump up and down and scream. Hannah had sidled into the shop by now, and was sitting in the chair, watching with interest.

Mr. Ollivander was hoarse from talking so much. "Troublesome customer, are we?" he grinned, coughing. "Your mother found her match in just two minutes! Oh well, your powers must be choosy. Here, try this one. Yew-wood and phoenix feather, thirteen-and-a-half inches, nice and flexible." Tom reached into the box and closed his fingers around the wand. Instantly, he felt a surge of hot energy shoot down his arm. He lifted the wand over his head and brought it down through the air.

A blast of sparks and colored light zoomed out of the wand and swirled all around the shop, bringing with it a gust of wind. Several boxes fell off their shelves, and the entire store was illuminated. Tom gasped and stared down at the wand in his hands. It felt warm under his fingers, and was still emitting tiny sparks. Mr. Ollivander clapped his hands with glee. "That'll be the one, Tom Riddle," he cried. "You have in your hands one of the most powerful wands I have ever come across. This one came from a healthy yew-tree and an exceptionally clever phoenix. We shall expect many great things from you, Tom Riddle."

"Bravo, Tom," Hannah cheered. "Better late than never, and what a finale!" Tom, his face flushed with relief, let his arm fall, still clutching the wand tightly. Hannah patted him on the shoulder and began searching her money bag. Mr. Ollivander was eyeing Tom's left hand shrewdly, but made no comment.

After they had paid for the wand, Tom voiced the question that had been lingering on his tongue for the longest time. "What's wrong with being left-handed?" he asked.

Hannah looked into his face. His brow was furrowed, and he looked deadly serious. "There's nothing wrong with it, per se," she said slowly. "It is simply very rare in the wizarding world. Some people think it is the sign of an outstandingly ambitious and powerful wizard, and I expect Mr. Ollivander was just worried that you might use your determination and talents the wrong

way. But that's just superstition, Tom, I wouldn't worry about it." Tom continued to look worried, so to cheer him up, Hannah suggested that they pay a visit to the Magical Menagerie and buy his animal.

The wizarding pet store was beyond anything Tom could have imagined. All around him were animals of every shape and size, from owls to rats. Tom's eyes fell on a doe-eyed barn owl, who was clicking her beak disapprovingly at all the people. The owl hooted as Tom crossed over to meet her, and closed her eyes in relaxation when he stroked her feathers. Tom was beginning to think how much he would like an owl.

"Is that the one?" Hannah asked, watching the owl fly off its perch and land on Tom's shoulder, nibbling his hair. "Let's see. That owl's... er... one-hundred-fifty Galleons."

Tom's face fell. He did not have enough money to spend that much all in one go, and Hannah certainly did not, either. The owl hooted sadly and returned to its perch, sensing what Tom was thinking. Hannah apologized gently, but Tom was not listening. He checked the price for a rat, but even though he could afford the two Galleons, he abhorred rats.

It was at that moment that Tom noticed that at the back of the store, there was a whole wall of tanks, each containing one snake. He straightened up and turned away from the rat cages, his eyes in the direction of the snake tanks. As Tom approached them, the snakes began whispering excitedly through the tank walls. Apparently, a snake could tell when a Parselmouth was near. "Hello," he hissed, making sure the shopkeeper was off somewhere else. "How are you, my friends?"

The snakes were all leaning toward him eagerly. "Are you going to buy one of usss?" a tiny garter snake asked keenly.

"I would sssso like it if you purchased me," a boa constrictor cried. "Thisss cage is rather too sssmall for me." Before Tom knew it, all of them were raising their voices, begging for Tom to buy them. Tom spotted a silvery snake with intent eyes that seemed especially persistent. He bent over to speak to it more quietly.

"What is your name?" he asked softly.

"I have no name," the snake replied, its voice like silk. "None of the other sssnakes like me much, sssso they have never named me." Tom felt a pang of empathy.

"Do you want a friend?"

"YESSS!" The snake was nodding excitedly.

Tom stood up and beckoned the woman behind the counter. "I'd like to buy this one, if you please." The woman looked impressed and slightly worried.

"That one's an Indian king cobra," she informed him. "Sure you can handle him, my boy?"

Tom exchanged a few whispered words with the snake. "He won't hurt me," Tom finally deduced. He paid the six Galleons for the cobra and bought a wicker cage for fourteen Knuts.

"What did you get?" Hannah asked, looking away from a fluffy ginger cat. Tom opened the wicker cage and the cobra poked its head out, flicking its tongue and spreading its hood. Hannah jumped back, dropping Tom's cauldron with a loud bang. The other customers turned and stared.

"His name is Nepenthe," Tom said casually, "and he won't hurt you. Hold out your hand. See? He likes you." Nepenthe licked Hannah's hand, and she immediately withdrew it, grimacing and muttering. Tom laughed. He had a very cheerful, warm laugh, in complete contrast to his usual sadness. Hannah glared at him, still terrified, but Tom continued to laugh, even as she dragged him out of the shop.

"She'll get used to you," Tom whispered reassuringly to Nepenthe, as they left Diagon Alley and came out at the Leaky Cauldron.

"I hope sssso," Nepenthe sighed, curling up. "I hate to think that she will disslike me."

With some reluctance, Hannah agreed to hide Nepenthe in her room until term began, along with Tom's school things. All through the summer, Tom would spend his recreation periods inside, reading the spellbooks over and over until he knew them all by heart.

After a while, he started doing small magic, turning bottles into toadstools and snails into teacups. One day in July, Tom even managed to make all of his school robes stand up, as though someone invisible were wearing them, and he had had them dance around the room with each other. Hannah had walked in on this operation and had been quite impressed with Tom's progress.

In August, Tom made a quick trip to Diagon Alley by himself, and he returned with his arms full of books he had bought for extra reading. Most of them involved advanced magic, including some rather unusual curses Tom was sure were not taught in school. For instance, he managed to master a curse that made the victim spew slugs for hours, and another that made leeks sprout out of one's ears. By the end of the month, he had become an adept dueler on top of everything else.

It was becoming harder and harder for Mr. Carney to find him. Mr. Carney could never catch him doing something he should not do. Gregory Hamill, too, seemed to have backed down, ever since the snake incident. Tom was left to himself, and he preferred it that way. It was easier for him to study, and however he might want to see Gregory with rabbit ears and a fluffy tail, Tom preferred the quiet.

All the while, Tom was counting down the days until September first.

4. Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin

Tom woke on September first to an enormous pattering on the roof. As he stepped out of bed and into his slippers, there was a flash, and the dormitory was briefly illuminated as thunder howled outside. He checked the wall clock and discovered that it was six-thirty. Tom had a fleeting idea of going back to sleep, but his stomach had already filled with energetic toads. Groggily cursing his nerves, Tom pulled on a dressing gown over his pajamas and sneaked across the hall to Hannah's room, making sure that Mr. Carney was safely snoring in the next chamber.

Tom rapped his knuckles on Hannah's door, quietly so that Mr. Carney would not wake up. Apparently, though, it was not enough to wake Hannah, either. He knocked again, but nobody answered. Tom tried the handle, knowing even as he did so that Hannah locked her doors at night. "Fine, be difficult," he snapped in a whisper. If Hannah was not awake, someone else was. Someone a little more nocturnal than Hannah. "Nepenthe!" Tom hissed through the keyhole. "Are you there?"

"Yesss," Nepenthe replied.

"Can you wake Hannah for me?" Tom requested. He knew Hannah would probably be after his blood if Nepenthe touched her, but he was desperate. "Just swat her with your tail or something."

"Pleased to ssserve," Nepenthe responded, with what sounded like a smile in his voice. Exactly eight seconds passed, and a muffled scream rang out. Luckily, Hannah had shrieked into her pillow, which stifled most of the noise. Mr. Carney snored on, although Tom heard a few of the orphans stir. Nobody came out, to Tom's relief.

After a few moments, Hannah could be heard shooing Nepenthe back into his basket. Tom struck the door again, and Hannah appeared in the doorway a second later, looking both terrified and homicidal. When she spotted Tom, she blanched. "Well," she fumed quietly, "guess whose 'harmless animal' just licked the back of my neck? Guess whose little pet scared me out of my wits?"

"Whose?" Tom asked innocently. He feigned a look of realization. "Did Mr. Carney set Bart Werner on you?" Tom queried, his face earnest. He was referring to the only orphan Mr. Carney liked at all; everybody viewed Bartholomew as Carney's lap dog.

Hannah could not resist laughing into her hand. "You go get ready, I'll get started on your packing," Hannah grinned, back in high spirits. Tom rushed off and returned quickly, wearing his only good clothes, a pair of blue jeans and a plaid sweater. He set to work dumping books into the trunk. Hannah hesitated suddenly, holding a book at arm's length.

"*An Encyclopaedia of Curses and Hexes?*" she asked inquisitively. "First-years don't need to know how to duel."

"I thought it could be useful," Tom shrugged, taking the book out of her hand and placing it on top of *The Standard Book of Spells: Grade 1*. He put his robes in the trunk last, knowing he would have to change into the uniform on the train. Once the packing was done, Hannah removed a second trunk from her closet. "Going somewhere?" Tom inquired.

"No," Hannah replied. "It's for Abby."

"Who's Abb--" Tom started, but stopped talking as a girl knocked tentatively on the doorframe. She was short, plump, and pretty, with auburn plaits and a rosy face. Tom recognized her as one of the rare orphans who clearly bathed often, and Tom could not remember ever having a confrontation with her. She looked at him curiously, positively beaming with excitement.

"This is Abby Forrey," Hannah informed Tom, rising to meet her. "She got one of the letters too, Tom. Abby, this is Tom Riddle."

"Also known as Tommy Salami," Tom put in coldly, as he watched Abby struggle to recognize him.

"Oh yeah!" Abby said cheerfully. She cocked her head. "I didn't know you knew how to talk." Tom furiously plunged a hand into his open trunk for his wand, but Hannah seized his arm and tugged him away from the trunk. Abby did not seem to notice. "I had no idea that stuff I could do was magic," she prattled. "My parents were both...Muggles, do you call them? Yes, both of them were Muggles, and I didn't even know magic existed until June! I can't wait, can you?"

Stupid question, Tom thought bitterly. Based on the Muggles he knew, none of them were any good. He was beginning to think that Abby, what with her Muggle parentage, had probably inherited a mean streak and a fondness for spontaneous beatings. Abby seemed pleasant enough, of course, but she had to have Muggle characteristics, and Tom expected her to show them at any time. "I can't wait either," Tom sighed, gingerly closing his trunk.

After they finished packing, Hannah magicked herself into Muggle clothes to Abby's intense awe, and the children lugged their trunks down to the lobby. Abby had a toad in a glass tank, which shrank away from Nepenthe's basket as though it knew what was inside. "He smells delicious," Nepenthe joked, and Tom gave out a hearty guffaw. Abby turned to see what he was laughing at, but Tom quickly masked it with a cough.

Hannah appeared a few minutes later. "We'll be taking a Ministry car," she said, looking breathless and wan. "They provide them for people who can't get to King's Cross any other way." As she spoke, a deep green car appeared in the drive on the other side of the playfield, water rolling down its sides. Tom grabbed his trunk in one hand and Nepenthe's cage in the other. Hannah escorted them down the steps hurriedly, but however they rushed, all three were soaked to the skin by the time they got to the car. A driver stepped out and placed their luggage in the car trunk, then opening the car door as they piled into the back.

Right as Tom was fastening his seatbelt, a great fork of lightning rent the sky, promptly followed by a clash of thunder. Abby squealed and snatched Tom's elbow. Tom had quite a time shaking her off, quickly starting to think that Abby was a bit of a pill. "Sorry," Abby said meekly, after Tom finally managed to throw her hand off his arm. "I'm afraid of thunderstorms."

"So I've noticed," Tom retorted shortly, resting his forehead on the windowpane and glaring out into the storm. Tom had always enjoyed lightning and thunder, and was not about to let Abby's phobias ruin his fun.

They arrived at King's Cross about two hours later. Hannah removed two peanut butter sandwiches from her bag and handed them to Abby and Tom, who ate them hurriedly. Hannah's watch told them it was ten-thirty, so they had half an hour to get their trunks on the train and claim compartments. Tom wearily stepped out into the sirocco and dragged his trunk into the station, Abby close behind him.

"All you have to do is walk through the barrier separating Platforms Nine and Ten," Hannah informed them, helping Abby lift her trunk onto a trolley. "That will transport you to the

Hogwarts Express platform. Hurry now, or you won't get decent seats." Abby rushed off, disappearing through the barrier. Tom lingered, his hand on the trolley, staring at Hannah.

"Well, goodbye," Tom said awkwardly. "I'll miss you, Hannah."

Hannah ruffled his hair. "I'll miss you too, Tom. Be sure to write to me, and keep me up to date on everything you do." Tom looked rather forlorn, but Hannah beamed at him. "Hurry up, Tom, I've got to get back to the orphanage before Mr. Carney realizes I've left someone else in charge." Tom nodded slowly and steered his trolley toward the barrier. Hannah watched him vanish, then spun on her heel and left.

With the hiss of steam being released from a valve, the Hogwarts Express started up. Tom looked out of the compartment window and watched all the proud parents waving their children goodbye. He spotted the Chubbs waving wildly at their daughter. Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were standing nearby, looking depressed, and Tom even saw a veela who had to be Ambika's mother, blowing curt kisses at a nearby window. Tom noticed in mild wonder that even the full-veela did not have the stupefying effect on him that Hannah had described.

Gradually, the station disappeared, replaced by gloomy outdoor scenes. The lightning seemed to have passed, leaving only a grim rainstorm. Tom rolled his eyes and turned away, looking around his compartment. His trunk kept sliding around under his seat, and Nepenthe was fast asleep in his cage, robbing Tom of the only company he might have had. After a while, Tom took his trunk out from under the seat and opened it, changing into his school robes and placing his wand in his belt. As an afterthought, Tom put on his hooded velvet cloak as well, knowing he would have to have something to keep him dry once he got off the train. Once he was in his uniform, Tom pulled *Hogwarts, A History* out of his trunk and settled down for a long read.

Tom barely had time to read, for there was a sudden knock on the door of the compartment, and Tom looked up sharply. "Who is it?" he demanded.

The door to the compartment slid open, and Tom bit his lip. It was Francis Malfoy, in the company of Ambika Dawes. Both of them looked just as truculent as ever, and they were both wearing their school robes and cloaks. "You would not mind if we sat in here, would you?" Francis asked coldly. Without waiting for an answer, the two of them sidled in. Francis was smirking, and Ambika had that uppity sneer on her face. "Riddle, right?" Francis scoffed.

"That's Tom, to you," Tom snapped, turning back to his book. Francis gave a nasty laugh.

"What an ordinary name," Ambika cackled. "Is it Thomas, or just Tom, like a smelly old tom cat?"

Tom looked up and surveyed Ambika mildly. "Do you always snort like that, Ambika, or do you have a head cold?" he retorted. Francis's smile was replaced by an ugly look.

"You have no right to say that to her, Mudblood," he snarled.

In one movement, Tom rose to his feet and whipped his wand out of his belt, pointing it at Francis. His eyes were unusually bright again, and his arm was shaking slightly. "Never call me that," he whispered. "Never. The wizard blood I have is far more potent than you could ever imagine, Francis. Now, get out of here. Nobody invited you."

Francis looked amused. "What can you do to me, Mudblood?" he chuckled. "I bet you can't even perform a simple--"

Tom's wand emitted a jet of orange light, and Francis cried out in pain as large green sprouts popped out of every inch of skin on his face and arms. Ambika plucked one of the sprouts, and it turned out that Tom had hit Francis with a Carrot Curse. Tom watched in amazement as Francis bounced around, tugging carrots out of his arms. The carrots he removed were quickly replaced by new ones. "Serve you right!" Tom said icily. "Now take your girlfriend and get out of here before I do something worse." Francis heeded Tom's warning and sprang out of the compartment, quickly followed by Ambika, who looked stunned.

Tom fell back into his seat, flushed with fury and exhilaration. He felt strange, like an enormous bubble was expanding right under his throat. He had never really anticipated the feeling of power it gave him to see someone under the influence of his own magic. Francis Malfoy was scared out of his wits and covered with carrot sprouts, and Tom had been the one to put him in that state. If he could do that, Tom mused, he could do anything! Slowly, Tom looked down at his left hand. His knuckles were white around the wand, and he was still shaking. Tom replaced it into his belt, not quite sure what to think. Instead of pondering it further, Tom resumed his reading.

At six-thirty, the train screeched to a halt at Hogsmeade Station, and the students timidly filed off the train. Tom left his luggage on the train like everybody else, tugged the hood of his cloak over his head, and followed the other students down the steps, his pointed hat clutched in his hand. The platform was noisy and crowded, but Tom was able to make his way across it. A tall, auburn-haired professor was waving his hands in the air, his half-moon spectacles glinting. "First-years, this way!" he cried. "First years, over here." Tom was one of the first to find him, mainly because he was so tall that he could see over everyone else's heads. "Are you a first-year? Good. Just stay by me, don't let anyone shove you away. First years, over here!"

Gradually, Tom was surrounded by about forty boys and girls, all shivering in the pouring rain. The auburn-bearded professor marched them away from the crowd toward the edge of a lake, where ten boats were tied to the dock. Tom got into the same boat as the auburn-haired professor, and three other children sat there with him. One of them was a very disgruntled Lucy Chubb, who was fretting over the rainwater on her ermine cloak. The other two were conversing intently, and when they spotted Tom, they started whispering madly. Tom recognized them as the two girls who had giggled at him in the Leaky Cauldron.

Lucy seemed to know them. "Christie, Michelle, hi!" she greeted, scooting over to sit with them. "How are you?" The tête-à-tête continued in hushed voices, and the three of them kept glancing at Tom, grinning. Disgusted, Tom turned his attention to the professor.

"Is everybody in a boat?" the professor hollered over the din. "All right, off we go!" The boats magically broke free of the dock and sailed across the lake. Rain kept splashing into Tom's eyes, but he was thoroughly enjoying himself. Tom had never been in a boat before, and it was wonderful. Tom thought he saw an enormous squid dart under the boat, but he might have imagined it.

Tom was the only one who was really liking the ride. Most people looked pale and green, and those who did not were leaning over the side of their boats. Tom tried not to watch, but he did take some pleasure in noting that Francis Malfoy was among the sickest. His pasty face had been rid of carrots, and Tom guessed he had found an older student who knew the counter curse.

Once they had made it back on solid ground, the professor led them through a thicket of trees, and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry finally came into view. It was a towering castle with numerous turrets. Above the large oak doors was a burnished copper shield bearing the

Hogwarts coat of arms. Tom read the words of the school motto on the shield, "*Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus*," and could not stifle a laugh. He knew enough Latin to realize that this meant "Never tickle a sleeping dragon."

Finally, the students dashed up the stone steps into the entry hall, sopping wet and freezing. The entry hall was beautiful inside, more attractive than any other room Tom had ever seen. The house flags hung on the walls, and their way was lit by glimmering torches. The professor stood before them, allowing them to admire the hall briefly before beginning his welcoming speech. Tom peeled his hood off his head and riveted his eyes on the professor, suddenly very conscious of the fact his cloak was dripping on the floor.

"Welcome to Hogwarts. My name is Professor Dumbledore, and I am to be your Transfiguration teacher," the professor began. "You are about to be sorted into your school Houses. There are four Houses at Hogwarts: Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin." Tom wondered vaguely why Slytherin was always listed last, and Gryffindor first. "Each has a noble history, and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. You will be placed in your House based on your character and talents, but trust me, none of the teachers here are about to play favorites. Just because I happen to be head of Gryffindor House does not mean that I will give a Slytherin an F on an A+ test." A few people sighed with relief, and Professor Dumbledore gave them a reassuring smile.

"Well, without further ado, let's get you lot Sorted." With that, he threw open a set of double doors and the first-years scurried inside. Tom found himself in an enormous chamber whose beauty far surpassed that of the entrance hall. There were four long tables, two along each of the longest walls, draped in dyed linen. One table was red, one blue, one green, and one yellow. At the very head of the room was a table with a violet cloth. There were four large stained glass windows (one design for each House) along one of the walls, and the rest of the walls were hung with tapestries. Tom's eyes shot up to the ceiling, which was enchanted to look like the sky outside. Right now it was turbulent and stormy, with the occasional flash of lightning.

As they entered, hundreds of heads turned their way, and Tom suddenly felt very small. He had not known that they had to be Sorted in front of the entire school. Professor Dumbledore swept in, carrying a stool and a patched, frayed wizard's hat. He set the stool down in the middle of the room with the hat on top of it, then stood aside. After a few seconds, and completely without warning, the hat began to sing.

*I am the Hogwarts Sorting Hat,
First sewn in days of yore.
I have lived right here for many years,
Ten centuries or more.
My masters were a clever bunch
With powers of renown.
They built this place with magic and
Their names are quite well known.
Sir Gryffindor, the brave and bold,
Young Hufflepuff, the kind,
Bright Ravenclaw, of books and words,
Slytherin, the shrewd of mind.
They sought their students far and wide,
Searching without rest,
But each had his or her notion
Of which children were the best.
Gryffindor loved those of spunk,*

*Adventurous and daring.
Hufflepuff preferred the ones
Who were patient, sweet, and caring.
Ravenclaw was fond of those
Whose brains were sharp and clear.
Slytherin sought those of wit
Who held ambition dear.
When they were getting on in years,
The founders had a fear.
When they all were dead and gone,
Who would choose students here?
That is where this Hat comes in.
They chose me as the one
Who would select the best for them
Out of the mighty throng.
So put me on, don't be afraid.
I've never yet been wrong.
Hear what I've said upon your head
And go where you belong!"*

There was an uproarious applause, and Tom felt relief wash over him. He had only to put on a hat, that was not too embarrassing. Professor Dumbledore raised his hands for silence. "I will read off your name," he shouted over the din, "and you will sit on the stool and put on the Sorting Hat. When the Hat calls out your House, you will go to your appropriate table. Aberson, Robert!"

A small boy with mousy hair staggered forward, shivering from head to toe. The Hat completely covered his face. In a few seconds, it screamed, "HUFFLEPUFF!" The yellow table erupted with cheers, and several Hufflepuffs rose to pat Robert on the back. Tom realized they must be going in alphabetical order, and his heart sank. He would have to wait forever.

"Andes, Electra!" A girl with golden hair and freckles glided forward and sat down on the stool, placidly placing the Hat on her head. It had barely grazed her head when it loudly proclaimed her a Slytherin. Electra smiled slightly and pirouetted over to the green table, where she was greeted warmly.

"Bates, Murray!" then became a Ravenclaw, followed by "Birch, Serena!" being made Slytherin. "Cedric, Philip!" became the first new Gryffindor, and the red table gave him a rowdy welcome. Tom thought the Gryffindors looked like a bunch of troublemakers, though not in an unpleasant way.

"Chubb, Lucy!" Tom watched as Lucy stomped forward grumpily, water still dribbling off of her matted ermine cloak. The Hat had a lot of trouble with Lucy, who kept on loudly requesting, "Anything but Slytherin. Anything but Slytherin." Finally, Lucy was sent to the Gryffindor table, and Tom sighed with relief. If she was in Gryffindor, Tom would not have to deal with her too often.

After Jack Davidson was made a Ravenclaw, Ambika Dawes sailed along and sat on the stool, flirting with the boys before putting the Hat over her silvery hair. Tom looked around. Every male face at every House table was looking hopeful. "GRYFFINDOR!" the Hat cried. There was a roar of outrage from the other three tables, while the Gryffindor boys looked smug.

The Sorting went on. Tom watched Abby Forrey get Sorted into Hufflepuff, exactly as he predicted. He was beginning to feel restless by then. "Laughlan" ... "Lewis" ... "Mallory" ... "Malfoy, Francis!" Tom was jerked out of his reverie as he watched Francis swagger forward. He crossed his fingers in his pockets, praying that Francis would be put in any House but--

"SLYTHERIN!" the Hat shrieked. Tom groaned and slumped against the wall, hiding his face in his hands. How could he go into Slytherin, knowing that Francis was going to be there, too? Tom only opened his eyes when Professor Dumbledore got to the names beginning with P.

"Palmer, Beth!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Pearson, Griffith!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Tom watched as Lili Po, a shy-looking Asian girl, was sorted into Ravenclaw. His heart was beating so loudly he was surprised nobody else could hear it. Surely he was next. He had to be. The next seconds seemed to go in slow-motion.

"Riddle, Tom!"

Tom walked right up to the stool, his back straight and his head held high. He could feel the eyes of every person in the hall, following him, wondering where this boy would go. Slowly, Tom lowered himself onto the seat, and he placed the Sorting Hat upon his head. It fell over his eyes, and Tom gripped the edge of the stool very hard. "Finally," he thought to himself.

"Impatient, are you?" said a tiny voice in his ear. "Mmm hmm. Let's see here. Wow, what a mind! You have quite an intellect in here, Tom." Tom smiled. "You would certainly do well in Ravenclaw with a brain like that. Brave, too. You have many talents, more than even you could imagine." The Hat paused. "Hufflepuff, as you probably know, is out of the question, and Gryffindor wouldn't work for you," the Hat said shortly. "They'd both reject you. You're too different. It's Ravenclaw or Slytherin, Tom Riddle. It's up to you."

Tom sighed, considering his choices. "Ravenclaw, but--"

"Only because that Malfoy boy is in the House you really want?" the Hat replied smartly. "I wouldn't do that to you, Tom Riddle. What you really want is your destiny, and your destiny is... SLYTHERIN!" Tom pulled the Hat off his eyes. The entire hall was still watching him as he shakily rose, placed the Hat on the stool, and ambled over to the green table. The Slytherins were all beaming widely at him, but Tom could not help but hear the booing and hissing coming from the Gryffindor table.

"Ignore them," a Slytherin fourth-year advised him, her brows furrowed at the Gryffindors. "They're just jealous." Tom shot a fiery glance back over at the Gryffindor table, but they were watching Molly Robbins being Sorted, and seemed to have forgotten he existed. The Gryffindors started cheering and stamping as Molly headed toward their table, grinning broadly.

Francis Malfoy was looking murderous. "You got into Slytherin?" he sneered in disbelief. "Who'd you have to pay to get the Hat to put you here, Mudblood?"

"I wouldn't make any comments if I were you, Malfoy," Tom replied smoothly, "or I'll set a rabbit on you. You know how much they love carrots." Most of the Slytherins howled with laughter, including a boy who had just sat down on Tom's left.

Francis turned crimson and went for his wand, but he noticed that one of the teachers was looking at him. "You're lucky the teachers are watching," Francis scowled. Tom snickered and turned away.

Once the Sorting was done, the golden plates and goblets were magically filled. Tom stared at his plate. He had never been offered so much food before in his life. He promptly began to eat faster than any of the others, as though worried someone would take it all away. The other Slytherins stared at him like they had never seen a human being before. The boy beside him who had laughed at Francis looked nonplussed. "Hungry?" he asked gingerly.

Tom struggled to swallow a mouthful of rice. "Ravenous," he replied, and he immediately started up again.

"Do they starve you at home, Mudblood, or are you just a pig?" Francis scowled.

"Eat slime, Malfoy," a first-year girl snapped, shoving her bushy black bangs out of her eyes. "What a schmuck," she moaned. "Sorry about him. Tom, right? I'm Larkin Mallory." Tom shook her hand, and she grinned at him.

"How exactly did you do that Carrot Curse?" the boy beside him asked eagerly. "Zuhayr Sahabjira, by the way."

Before Tom knew it, several of the Slytherin first-years were demanding instructions on how to perform the curse. Tom was not quite sure what to do. He was not used to having people talk to him. Finally, he gave in, and started to describe the workings of the curse, while Francis glowered silently at the other end of the table.

5. The Other Houses

Tom was wandering through the hallway. It was not a Hogwarts hallway, but one he had never seen before. It was shadowed, with sinister-looking Muggle photographs on the walls. With every step, Tom felt a sense of foreboding. Tom looked down into his hand and saw that he had his wand out. He thought this was probably a good idea, something about the hall gave him the creeps.

A sudden breeze came in from the next room. Tom looked in, and saw that the window was open, lacy curtains fluttering in the gust. He slowly walked over and closed the window and shut the drapes. As he turned to leave, a mirror caught his eye. It was full-length and edged with gold. Right now, it was pointed away from Tom, so he strolled over and looked at the front of it.

He saw himself standing there, wearing his Hogwarts uniform. Tom realized he was a few years older, probably about fourteen or fifteen, and he seemed a little paler than usual. Then, without warning, the reflection in the mirror began to change. It grew taller, going from slender to skeletal, the skin going even paler. Tom took a few steps back in horror as the reflection acquired a completely new face. It was gaunt and flat, with slits for nostrils and gleaming red eyes. "Behold," it laughed. The laugh was a high-pitched, frigid cackle. "Behold," the reflection repeated. It raised its wand and pointed it at Tom.

There was a blinding flash of green light...

"No!"

Tom was sitting bolt-upright in bed, his eyes as wide as saucers, breathing hard. The heavy, green velvet drapes of his bed were shut, but from the sound of it, none of the other Slytherin boys were awake. Tom opened the drapes slightly and checked his alarm clock. It was three o'clock in the morning, the morning after Tom had arrived at Hogwarts. Hands shaking, Tom got up and walked over to the window, where there was a small tap on the windowsill, along with five labeled goblets.

He filled his goblet with water and sipped it nervously as he stared out of the window. It was still dark, and it was raining as hard as ever. Tom sat down on the stool near his bed, still shaking. The dream was still vivid in his mind, especially that face with the red eyes. God, what a horrible face. It looked like a snake's face transfigured to fit a human head, and those eyes... Tom shuddered convulsively. There was a rustling sound, and Francis Malfoy poked his head out of the drapes. Tom glared at him. "Leave me alone," Tom murmured. The only reason Francis had not ratted (or cursed Tom in his sleep) was that two other Slytherin boys, Zuhayr Sahabjira and Adrian Müller, had threatened to put the Body Bind on him if he did.

"Why should I leave you alone, Mudblood?" Francis smirked.

"I'm a half-blood, Malfoy, when are you going to get that through your thick skull?" Tom said softly, his eyes boring into Francis like a pair of turquoise drills. "Now leave me alone, or I will make you." Francis was about to make another snide remark, but he stopped. He had realized that Tom was twirling his wand between his long fingers, looking quite like he might be considering cursing Francis again. Francis leered at him and whipped his drapes closed. It was hard to tell which face showed deeper dislike.

At eight o'clock, Tom woke again to a more active dormitory. Tiny, tubby Richard Zabini was hopping around, trying to get his foot into a sock. Adrian was fully dressed, waiting for Zuhayr,

who was hurriedly trying to get ready. Tom panicked, worried that he might be late for class, but he remembered that class started at nine, and he still had an hour.

"Hey, Tom," Zuhayr grinned. "I see you're finally awake."

"I had a bad night," Tom replied loftily. The other boys laughed. "I had a nightmare about this hideous, evil specter..."

Adrian got a glint in his eye. "Speaking of which, where is Francis?" he asked. Tom and Zuhayr chortled, but Richard looked mildly offended.

"He went down to the common room already," Zuhayr responded, struggling to get his robes over his head. "Had this enormous book with him. Something about curses."

Tom thought rather nervously that Francis might be plotting revenge, but he did not let it bother him too much. His mind was still on the dream. What had it meant?

He washed up in the dormitory bathroom, dressed quickly, and followed Zuhayr and Adrian down the steps into the circular common room, leaving Richard still bouncing around the room. Like the Gryffindors, the Slytherins had a whole tower to themselves, and their common room was round and cozy. Tom saw Francis sitting before the fire, his face hidden behind 101 Easy Curses. When Tom passed him, Francis looked up and shot a glance of pure venom at him. "Nice to see you too, Francis," Tom said, giving Francis a fake grin.

"Smarmy git," Adrian added in an undertone as they walked away. "Bet he's trying to find something like the Carrot Curse to try on you."

Tom tossed his wand up in the air and caught it expertly. "Let's go down to breakfast," Tom suggested.

"Good idea," Zuhayr replied. "I'm getting sick to my stomach being within smelling distance of Malfoy there."

The three boys headed down to the Great Hall, where most of the students were already dining. Larkin Mallory was waiting for them, munching on bacon and eggs. "Finally, the lazy crew turns up," she grinned. "Pull up some chairs." Larkin was a very pretty girl, but she could look quite tough if she wanted. Richard was already terrified of her.

Tom sat down between Larkin and Adrian, while Zuhayr sat across from them. Instantly, an extensive breakfast appeared on their golden breakfast plates. "So, what about this dream you had, Tom?" Zuhayr smiled. "What happened?"

Tom nearly choked on his bacon at the memory of it. "I don't want to talk about it," he said shortly, loading his fork with omelet. "It was really weird." That was the last time Tom mentioned the dream for a long time, and his friends did not protest.

Suddenly, there was a large amount of whispering, and emerald-green sheets of paper were passed along the table. "Course schedules!" a third-year cried, handing Tom a schedule with his name on it. The schedule told him he had Double Herbology with the Ravenclaws first thing. Just as Tom read this, there was a roar of rage from the Ravenclaw table. Several first-years were standing up, and one ran right up to Professor Dippet. "Why'd we get stuck sharing a class with those freaks?" the boy demanded hotly. Next came the Gryffindors, who also seemed peeved. The Hufflepuffs did not cry out at all, but they looked terrified.

"Potions was going to be my favorite class!" a Gryffindor girl shrieked. "How could you ruin it for us all?" The Hufflepuffs cast a set of identical, petrified glances toward the Slytherin table.

"That explains it," Adrian scoffed, looking at his schedule. "They're all upset because they have Double classes with us. See? We have Potions with the Gryffindors, and Charms with the Hufflepuffs." Tom frowned.

"Why would they be upset about having classes with us?"

"It's obvious, Tom," Larkin said, surprised. "Over the years, so many rich jerks have been made Slytherin, they think we're all that way." Tom looked mortally offended. "It's a bunch of hooey, of course," Larkin continued, "but with little rats like Malfoy scurrying around, the rumor seems true to them."

To make matters worse, Francis (who had just arrived) chose this time to loudly proclaim, "Ugh, we've got Herbology with all the fatheads!"

The Ravenclaws looked daggers at the Slytherins, and some of them shouted back, "Well, you shouldn't complain, we're having Herbology with all the two-timing snobs!"

"THAT'S QUITE ENOUGH!" Professor Dippet cried. "Five points from Ravenclaw, and Mr. Malfoy, you will pay off your outburst in detention." There was a ringing silence, and Tom turned back to his breakfast.

His stomach felt like a knot. Since when did the other Houses hate Slytherin? In his mother's photograph, her best friend was a Gryffindor. No, it could not be right. Tom got up from the table. "Where are you going?" Adrian asked. "You've barely eaten anything."

"I have to get ready for class," Tom replied absently. As he passed the Ravenclaw table, he caught the eye of a prefect and smiled. The Ravenclaw girl looked at him like he had lobsters crawling out of his ears. "Morning," Tom called, hoping for any kind of response. The girl scowled at him and stuck out her tongue. His worst suspicions confirmed, Tom sighed heavily and hurried back to Slytherin Tower.

Tom had quite been looking forward to Herbology, but by the end of his first lesson, he was feeling doubtful. The teacher, Professor Sevigny, was a very good professor, but she could do little to stop the Ravenclaws from expressing their anger with the Slytherins over Francis's comment. Tom and Adrian ended up pruning the same Viridius plant as Fiona Jedias and Victoria Tanner, both of Ravenclaw. When Tom tried to engage them in conversation, the two of them just sneered at him. "Why do you hate us so much?" Tom demanded angrily.

"Is that the wind, Fiona?" Victoria scoffed. "I can't hear anybody talking."

At this, Tom lost his temper completely; without warning, their Viridius exploded, showering the two Ravenclaw girls with Viridian Juice. Both of them turned a brilliant shade of green and began sizzling, squealing in pain. Somehow, Tom managed to smooth it over, making it look like one of the girls had accidentally pruned one of the juice-filled bulbs. Professor Sevigny had to hurry off to the hospital wing with Fiona and Victoria in tow.

In distinctly low spirits, the Slytherins made their way up to Professor Xavier's Defense Against the Dark Arts class after lunch. Only Francis and Richard were happy. Unlike Tom and his friends, they seemed to find the demise of Victoria and Fiona amusing. "Did you see the look on their faces, the little prats?" Francis kept laughing.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was a far better experience than Herbology. First thing, Professor Xavier showed them a Red Cap in a tank, explaining its anatomy and powers. "The Red Cap is a distant relative of the vampire," Professor Xavier informed them. "See his fangs? They contain tiny canals into his stomach, and he sucks blood through his teeth." Annie Lewis retched and looked distinctly ill. Professor Xavier then explained how to ward off the Red Cap, hinting that there may be a test on the subject in the near future. Tom paid rapt attention and took so many notes that he used up a whole two-meter roll of parchment and significantly lowered his supply of ink.

"What do we have next?" Tom asked Zuhayr as they trooped out of the classroom.

"Transfiguration," Zuhayr replied, pulling out his Transfiguration book and his wand. "After that's Double Charms with Hufflepuff."

"Damn it, another Double class?" Zuhayr nodded grimly.

Professor Dumbledore greeted them outside the door of his classroom. He had a very long, straight nose, and his hair and beard were long enough to tuck into his belt. As they piled into the classroom, Tom accidentally collided head-on with Professor Dumbledore. Tom hit the floor, and Professor Dumbledore stumbled. "Sorry!" Tom gasped. "I'm so sorry, somebody hit me from the side--"

"Nice going, Riddle!" Francis called over Richard Zabini's head. Both of them were cackling stupidly. Professor Dumbledore looked at them sternly, and they fell silent at once.

He held out a hand and helped Tom off the floor. "Thanks--sorry," Tom mumbled awkwardly.

"You're welcome, and it's no problem," Dumbledore replied, smiling. "Tom Riddle, right?" Tom nodded.

Tom took a seat at the very front of the room, eager to begin. He had his hand on his wand. Professor Dumbledore swept up to his desk, took roll, and began the lesson. Again, Tom took a very extensive set of notes. He did not want to miss a thing. After the lecture was over, Professor Dumbledore handed out matches, which they were supposed to turn into needles. As Tom looked down at his match, he felt slightly disappointed. After turning bits of paper onto birds, this seemed too easy.

He took his wand out of his belt and tapped the match carelessly. Instantly, it became a perfect needle. Professor Dumbledore, who was pacing up the rows and giving people tips, saw Tom staring at the table and not doing anything. "Having trouble?" he started to ask, but he saw the needle lying on the desk, then looked up at Tom, who looked positively bored. "Mr. Riddle has done it," Professor Dumbledore announced, showing the class Tom's needle. "Good Lord, that only took you a few seconds. Can I see you at my desk, Tom?"

Francis sniggered. Tom looked up at the professor. Had he done something wrong? When he got to Professor Dumbledore's desk, the teacher pulled a flower out of the drawer. "Turn this into a butterfly, please, Tom," Professor Dumbledore prompted. Tom sighed. This was also too easy. A moment later, a large yellow butterfly was fluttering around the room.

Professor Dumbledore looked impressed. "You know your stuff," he chuckled. "Let's see..." He dug around in his desk and withdrew a teapot. "How about transfiguring this into a box turtle?" Tom was beginning to grow frustrated. Why was the teacher giving him so much easy work? The teapot vanished, replaced by a very grumpy looking turtle.

People were now standing up to see what Tom was doing. Professor Dumbledore kept giving him harder and harder objects to transfigure, until Tom (with a bit of difficulty) turned a pair of rabbits into a pair of bunny slippers and the professor had to give it a rest. He was looking at Tom with a mixture of amazement and confusion. "How much can you do?" he asked slowly. His blue eyes were twinkling.

Tom shuffled his feet. "That's probably it," he said softly. "Maybe a bit more, but I'm not sure how far I--"

The bell rang, and Tom hurriedly snatched his bookbag and rushed off before Dumbledore could ask him to do anything else. His face was bright pink, and his classmates kept staring at him.

Charms was taught by a small young man named Professor Flitwick, who looked like he was just out of school himself, and he had a voice like he had been breathing helium since birth. Tom took a seat close to a window, his quill at the ready. The Slytherins were there a lot earlier than the Hufflepuffs, who had to come all the way up from the Potions dungeon. When the Hufflepuffs arrived, they appeared to be scared out of their wits, and they took seats as far away from the Slytherins as possible.

Charms was nearly as bad as Herbology, but for an entirely different reason. The students were supposed to make their button hop across the table, and Tom, of course, mastered this before anybody else. Professor Flitwick, delighted, had Tom go around and help all of the Hufflepuffs, who were too nervous to perform the charm properly. Tom sighed heavily and made his way over to the Hufflepuffs. All of them looked extremely ill.

"Hi, Abby," Tom said, starting with the only Hufflepuff he knew. Abby squealed and shrank into her chair, shuddering. "Okay, all you need to do is--"

"I can do it by myself!" Abby squeaked, sounding very much like Professor Flitwick.

Tom glared at her and moved on to the next Hufflepuff, Daniel Jarvis, who only allowed Tom to help because he was too frightened to object. Half an hour later, Tom was beginning to wonder why the Hufflepuffs were so very afraid of the Slytherins, but at that instant, Michelle Field of Hufflepuff let out a long, piercing scream. Tom looked up sharply, and he saw that her right arm was covered with large green boils. Professor Flitwick rushed over, panicked, but Tom made it there first.

"*Avrecio Mararium*," he cried, pointing his wand at Michelle's arm. The boils disappeared, but Michelle did not look at all grateful. She scowled at him, her mild Hufflepuff temper exploding for once.

"YOU SLYTHERIN RAT!" She pointed at him, tears rolling down her cheeks. "WHY DID YOU CURSE ME?"

"He didn't curse you, dear, he performed the counter-curse," Professor Flitwick said soothingly.

"Yes, *after* he cursed me!" she shrieked. Tom felt a surge of anger, and the wand in his hand suddenly gave off a jet of golden sparks. He hurriedly tucked it back into his belt.

"I didn't curse you," Tom snapped. "I had my wand away when you were cursed. Griffith Pearson can back me up, right?" Griffith nodded, wincing and clearly feeling bad for assisting an enemy. "Besides, why would I curse you, and then un-curse you? It doesn't make sense."

Michelle sank back into her seat, bristling. Tom looked back over at the Slytherin half of the room, and was not at all surprised to see that Francis Malfoy was smirking at him, his wand

smoking. Richard Zabini was snickering. Professor Flitwick did not notice, and he went on with the lesson.

By the end of class, Tom had a few minor burns on his hands and wrists. Some of the Hufflepuffs decided to "accidentally" let sparks out of their wands, still not believing Tom was innocent. Michelle Field had abandoned all pretense and tried to curse him, but it had not worked. Professor Flitwick had had to take ten points from Hufflepuff to get her to stop.

"You think Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff are bad," Adrian warned him, "wait till we get to Potions. The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs dislike us immensely. The Gryffindors hate us."

Tom looked down at his charred hands, which Professor Flitwick had deemed unworthy of a visit to the hospital wing. "Let's just hope the Gryffindors don't know how to do much more than send sparks, either," Tom sighed. He thanked the Sages that Michelle Field had a lisp, or she would have pronounced "*sasprissionis*" correctly, and Tom would have Jelly Legs on top of everything else.

History of Magic, which was the Slytherins' first class on Tuesdays, would soon become one of Tom's favorites. The teacher, Professor Twiddly, was a tall black woman who knew how to make history interesting. On their very first day, Professor Twiddly handed out battle plans used in real goblin rebellions, saying that they would be directing trained pixies in replications of various important battles. She also promised they would have witch trials and other role-playing activities, all of which would help them learn history. By the end of the day, it was most Slytherins' favorite class.

Only Francis had anything to complain about, and that was that Professor Twiddly did not seem to like him. Then again, that did not surprise anybody except Richard Zabini.

Potions, however, was precisely the opposite. Professor Chapman was Head of Slytherin House, with a small beard and mustache, dusty-grey hair, and eyes the same color as Mr. Ollivander's. He was very strict, but Tom did not mind this. The Gryffindors were the problem. However friendly a Slytherin might try to be, the Gryffindors would be more likely to curse him or her than try diplomacy.

When they were making Swelling Solution, Molly Robbins had dipped a gloved hand into her cauldron and chucked a blob of potion across the room to the Slytherins. It hit the bespectacled Annie Lewis in the shoulder, and she had to hurry up to the front of the room, whimpering in pain as her shoulder ballooned to an enormous size. Professor Chapman gave Molly a detention and deducted fifty points from Gryffindor. The Gryffindors roared with outrage.

"Why do *they* look so upset?" Larkin had sneered over her cauldron. "They didn't get splattered with potion, now, did they?" Tom glared over at the Gryffindors, who were comforting Molly. He quickly decided they were troublemakers in a bad way, after all. Lucy Chubb shot him a dirty look, and he averted his eyes.

Before anyone knew it, it was October. Since the beginning, Tom had wanted to learn everything. He was naturally ambitious, and this was probably increased by his acquired urge to prove himself. Tom wanted to demonstrate to everybody that he was not Tommy Salami anymore, that he could be more than that. In that sense, he succeeded immensely. By October, Tom was at the top of every class, studying harder than everybody else. His circle of friends had widened to

include all of the first-year Slytherin girls and a good number of elder students, though Larkin, Zuhayr, and Adrian remained his closest companions. Even Richard Zabini was sometimes friendly, though he was generally loyal to Francis.

Unfortunately, the other Houses remained vindictive. The Ravenclaws, who were quite wordy, came up with brilliant insults, and the Hufflepuffs were adept at spreading rumors about older Slytherins. Tom was particularly unpopular with the Hufflepuffs, who still seemed to think he had cursed little Michelle Field. One day a fourth-year Hufflepuff, Rankin Prewitt, bribed Peeves the Poltergeist to sneak up on Tom in a hallway and draw polka dots on his robes with chalk. Tom had had to go to History of Magic looking like a white leopard in reverse.

However, the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were nothing to the Gryffindors. For no reason other than sadism, a bunch of Gryffindors enchanted several buckets of water so that they would hover near the ceiling. Whenever a Slytherin walked under one, the bucket would overturn and dump water on the person's head. This got the Gryffindors into an awful lot of trouble, but not until after they had drenched all the Slytherins in the school at least twice.

On the first weekend of October, Tom, who had some free time for once, was curled up in the common room reading *An Assortment of Interesting Curses and Charms*. His friends were playing Exploding Snap and Gobstones on the rug, while Francis and Richard conversed in low tones, once in a while looking over to see if Tom was eavesdropping. Tom did not mind if they were plotting his assassination. He already knew disarming and blocking spells, and was confident that he could avoid being hexed by either of them.

All of a sudden, a piece of parchment appeared by the door. The first-years rushed over to read the notice.

ATTENTION FIRST-YEAR SLYTHERINS:

Flying Lessons will begin on Thursday at nine o'clock on the side lawn of the school. Broomsticks will be provided, and your instructor will be Secunda Milviron.

Slytherins should also note that they are having this class with the Gryffindors.

Tom felt his heart sink.

6. Triumph and Tragedy

On Thursday morning, the Slytherins trudged across the dewy grass, treading on the occasional slug and feeling thoroughly depressed. Tom kept glancing at the sky. It was clear, but cold as ice. It barely seemed like the twentieth of October, for the temperature indicated midwinter. Adrian offered a race, but Tom turned it down, feeling too stiff to do much of anything, let alone force his legs to move too quickly.

Tom was feeling particularly distracted this morning. He had had an owl from Hannah, telling him that his father had contacted her at the orphanage. He had left only one message, and that was that he was warning Tom never to come near him. Inwardly, Tom thanked his father for the idea. Somehow, he would find his father and... Tom's thoughts ended here, for he had no idea what he would do when he did find his father. Tom felt no affection toward the Muggle. He knew that his mother had become severely depressed when his father abandoned her, severely enough to affect her health. Ultimately, Tom held his father entirely responsible for his mother's death.

He would have to punish him, somehow, for hurting his mother so horribly, for ruining Tom's life. "A few good shots of the Cruciatus Curse would do it," Tom thought bitterly, kicking a rock out of his path. The Cruciatus Curse was extremely advanced, and it gave the performer the power to put the victim in excruciating pain for as long as was necessary. Tom knew it was dreadful, but he somehow did not think that his father would learn his lesson through a few carrots sprouting on his face.

The Quidditch teacher, Madam Milviron, appeared on the horizon, with twenty broomsticks lying in rows on the ground before her. Tom listened to Francis idly. Francis was boasting that he had flown trillions of times and that he did not need lessons. Tom sneered. He was sure that Francis was not half the flier he made himself out to be; his stories always seemed to have loopholes.

"Where are the Gryffindors?" Annie Lewis asked as they reached Madam Milviron. Annie had horn-rimmed glasses over blue eyes and multitudes of freckles, and her bushy blood-red hair was hacked off sharply at the nape of her neck. Tom liked her, probably because she also had a dissatisfactory Muggle parent, in this case her mother.

"They'll be here in a jiff," Madam Milviron responded. "All of you stand by your brooms."

Tom, thinking about completely different things, stood beside an old Comet Sixteen. Francis was looking at the brooms, a look of disdain on his face--disdain mixed with distinct anxiety. "I--erm, can't fly on these," he said haughtily. "I have a higher standard of broomstick quality than this."

Serena Birch tried to stifle a snort of laughter, but failed.

"Think it's funny, do you?" Francis snarled. "I happen to have a brand-new Shooting Star at home, and it's far easier to fly than one of these old wrecks." Madam Milviron looked as though Francis had just insulted one of her children. Rather curtly, she assigned Francis to a broomstick, ignoring his grumbling.

An instant later, the Gryffindors arrived, cocky smirks spread across their faces. Tom wished they could see themselves; he was sure they would laugh. Only Ambika Dawes and Lucy Chubb looked serious. Lucy was fussing over her patent-leather shoes, which were covered with slug entrails, and Ambika was shivering against the cold. She had not brought her cloak, though. Tom had a sneaking suspicion that she had left her cloak off so that her curvy figure would show

through better. Tom and Adrian paid her no heed, but all the other boys riveted their attention on her, drooling like Saint Bernards. To Tom's fury, even Zuhayr was gawking like an idiot. Adrian shook his head, muttering, "Silly gits."

Philip Cedric (who had assumed the position of leader for the Gryffindors) stepped forward, throwing out his chest. He was busy instructing his fellow Gryffindors on flying. "It's all really simple. I've been doing it since I was two years old," he grinned pompously. Tom glared at him, already hating Philip with a passion. Philip caught Tom's eye and grinned still wider. "Of course, that one's going to need lessons," he informed his friends. "He's a Slytherin and a Mudblood. That means, respectively, zero talent and zero experience. Bad combo, my friends."

"I am a half-blood, for your information," Tom retorted coldly. "In addition, I would keep any insults to myself if I were in your position. If you are going to insult my house, you would do well to do it outside of my hearing." His face looked strangely shadowed, and his eyes shone brilliantly. Philip and the Gryffindors had a good laugh over this, but Madam Milviron shushed them, seeing that Tom had his hand on his wand.

"Knock it off, Mr. Cedric. Don't lose your temper now, Mr. Riddle." Tom reluctantly removed his hand from his wand, still seething at Philip. Madam Milviron headed to the front of the lawn. "Hold your wand hand over your broom," she instructed, "and say 'up.'"

Tom got to the side so that his left hand could go over the broom, and in the process, collided with Philip, who had taken the broom beside his. Philip sniggered. "Stupid oaf," he whispered, so that Madam Milviron would not hear. Tom had to try very hard not to blast Philip to bits, instead concentrating on his broom.

"Up," he muttered. The broom sprang up to his hand instantly. Madam Milviron instructed them on their grips, but she had nothing to complain about with Tom. Tom removed his cloak, thinking it might cause too much drag.

"On my whistle, fly up ten feet. Three--two--one--" The whistle chirped, and Tom kicked off the ground. Instantly, Tom decided he loved flying. It was easy, Tom knew exactly what to do. He zoomed around the field, watching his classmates. Lucy Chubb was looking miserable and holding on for dear life, and Francis had actually fallen off his broom. Tom spotted Philip, who was smugly flying around all the others, showing off.

"Have fun now," Madam Milviron cried. "Come down when you want, just get used to flying."

This was easier said than done, Tom thought. He was not sure he could ever get used to this sense of euphoria. Feeling a little daring, he pulled back and shot up until he was a good seventy feet up in the air. A few students gasped, and Lucy almost fell off her broom. Philip, however, was not about to be shown up. He landed briefly, then flew up to meet Tom.

"Not bad, Pun," he growled.

"Pun?"

"Well, a pun's a riddle, isn't it?" Philip chortled. "Anyway, Pun, you fly pretty good."

"Pretty *well*," Tom corrected automatically.

Philip looked both mutinous and amused, an interesting combination. "Let's see just how well you do fly, then, Pun." With that, he pulled his wand out of his belt and sent a curse at Tom. Tom dodged immediately, but Philip was sending curses at him faster than lightning. Tom jetted out of the way. Philip just laughed.

"Missing something, Pun?" he cackled. Tom looked down at Philip, circling five feet below. Philip had a bundle of papers in his hand, a bundle that looked horribly familiar.

"Give that back," Tom said softly, panic rising in his throat.

Philip snickered and zoomed off toward the lake. Tom was in hot pursuit, his heart pounding. He heard Madam Milviron shrieking up at them to come down, but Tom did not listen. All that mattered was that he got his mother's letter and photograph back. Philip stopped, hovering a hundred feet above the lake, waving the bundle tauntingly in his fist. Tom halted inches away from him. He could use a Summoning Charm--but his wand was on the ground with his cloak.

"Give it back," Tom croaked. "Please, Philip."

"Okay. You want it, get it!" Philip called, tossing the bundle up in the air. It was tumbling toward the lake at an alarming speed. Tom did not stop to think, he only acted. He took a dive, rocketing downward, his left hand on the broom handle and his right hand outstretched. A few feet above the water, Tom outraced the bundle, caught it, and pulled out of the dive, flying straight ahead, the toes of his boots skimming the water. When he got to the edge of the lake, Tom landed, threw the broom aside, and slumped against a bush. He hurriedly unwrapped the bundle, checked that everything was intact, and finally allowed himself to breathe.

Madam Milviron dashed over as Philip landed. "That was a horrible trick to play!" she scolded Philip. "And Riddle, honestly, what were you thinking, risking your neck for a packet of papers?" Tom held out his mother's photograph, and realization came over her face. She spun on Philip, who was trying to sneak off. She was so furious only a few words came out. "No idea--cruel--heartless--why you'd--Professor Dumbledore--DETENTION!" Philip looked abashed. He had clearly been expecting praise.

"Riddle..." Madam Milviron turned back to him, looking amazed. "Where in the name of God did you learn how to fly like that?" Tom shrugged, feeling bewildered. The instructor was looking him up and down, as though sizing him up. "About the build. You're thin and lightweight, faster than most, sharp eyes. Too bad you're so tall, but we could work around that. I'll be sure to tell the Slytherin Quidditch captain about you, Tom. He might want to recruit you as a Seeker or Chaser next year."

The bell rang, and the Slytherins gathered up their things for their next class. Tom felt rather odd. He had never been athletic, and had not expected things to go well in Flying. He was always an excellent runner, but never anything more. "Life's full of surprises," Larkin told him when he expressed concern. "Just go with it, and don't kvetch."

On the morning of Halloween, Tom overslept. This was not surprising, considering that he had been up all night studying. Tom woke up with a start, saw that it was already eight-thirty, and panicked. He took twenty minutes getting ready before he hastened down the stairs, bookbag in hand, praying that he was not already late.

When Tom got to the Great Hall, he saw that it was decorated with giant jack-o'-lanterns, and that several hundred live bats were fluttering around the ceiling. He grabbed a seat at the Slytherin table across from Annie, Larkin, and Serena, all of whom were reading a letter from Larkin's mother and laughing hysterically. "Oh, hi, Tom," Serena chuckled.

"My little brother got in trouble at magical pre-school," Larkin giggled. "He swiped the teacher's wand and enchanted a couple of erasers so that they would zoom around the room and attack people. God, this is priceless..."

Tom was not really listening. He ate a piece of toast distractedly, rummaging through his bookbag for his Herbology notes. "Doing some last-minute cramming, Riddle?" Francis sneered. "I thought nerds didn't need to study like the common folk."

"Go to Hell," Tom snapped, skimming the parchment and trying to remember the four uses of Snickleberry roots. "I don't have time to deal with you, Francis. Keep your pointy little nose out of my business, unless you want a good kick in the--"

"Mr. Riddle?" Tom tensed and turned around to see that Professor Dumbledore was standing behind him. He looked deadly serious. Tom gulped and wondered how much of the argument the teacher had heard.

"Yes, sir?" Tom responded, his voice rather higher than usual.

"Professor Dippet wants to talk to you. He was sent an owl this morning, and it concerns you."

"I--"

"Follow me, Tom." The merry twinkle was gone from his eyes. "The Headmaster is in his office. You will most likely miss your first class."

Tom was hit by a dreadful feeling. Something was wrong, he could tell. Professor Dumbledore waited for him to rise, then led him from the Great Hall. "Professor, what is it?" Tom demanded. "I have to know. Please, tell me." Professor Dumbledore sighed and kept staring straight ahead. Tom was no mindreader, but he could tell that Dumbledore was sad, perhaps a little angry.

They reached a stone gargoyle at the end of a hallway. "Tweedle-dee," Dumbledore said. This was apparently a password, for the gargoyle moved aside, revealing a spiral staircase. Tom followed Professor Dumbledore up the steps, feeling increasingly uneasy. As they came to the double doors of Professor Dippet's office, Professor Dumbledore paused. "Tom, perhaps you should take the day off."

"Is the news *that* bad?" Tom asked, trying to laugh but feeling the toast churning in his stomach. Dumbledore did not answer, instead throwing the doors open.

Headmaster Dippet was seated behind his desk, reading a letter. He was ancient, with lines all over his face and only a tuft of white hair on his head. Dippet looked up when they walked in. "Is this Mr. Riddle?" he asked, his voice rickety with age. Dumbledore nodded, and Dippet beckoned Tom to sit down in the chair in front of him. He then uttered three words that changed Tom's life. "It's about Hannah," the Headmaster said softly. "I received a letter this morning. Miss Hiddy--"

"Her name is Hannah!" Tom cried, without really knowing why. Perhaps it was only to stall what he knew was coming.

"Hannah developed a Muggle ailment called--cancer, is it? Anyway, by the time she went to St. Mungo's to ask a mediwizard about it, it had spread too far to heal. She--"

"I knew it," Tom murmured, pressing his fingers to his temples. "I knew she was ill, and I told her to see a doctor, but..." His jaw was set, his face deadpan, though he looked extremely tense.

Headmaster Dippet let the letter fall from his hands. "I'm sorry," he finished. "I wish there were something I could do to make you feel better."

Tom's mind was a gallimaufry of half-shaped thoughts, and he could barely think straight. He wondered why the universe had not collapsed around him with Hannah gone. Or perhaps it *had* collapsed, and that was why he felt like screaming. "You don't have to go to any classes," Professor Dumbledore informed him. "Take the week off, I'll have the other teachers send you your homework with your friends."

"I have friends?" Tom thought dully. Everything seemed upside-down.

"Get on back to your common room, now, Tom. I need to talk to Professor Dippet." Dumbledore bade Tom goodbye, and Tom left the room. He hardly noticed where his feet were carrying him; his mind felt like a chalkboard after erasure. Tom climbed four flights of stairs until he reached the secret entrance to the Slytherin common room.

The guardian of the entrance was a painting of a wood nymph. "Password?" she chirruped.

"Quincunx," Tom replied, his voice hollow. The wood nymph giggled and her painting swung to the side. Tom entered the deserted common room, his footsteps reverberating strangely. Barely noticing what he was doing, Tom removed his Herbology book from his bookbag, collapsed into a winged armchair, and started reading. He saw the words, but they made no sense. Nothing made sense.

At about dinnertime, Tom woke up in the armchair, the Herbology book still open in his lap. He stared around the common room, wondering where he was, why he was there. Then he remembered. The dazed feeling was replaced by an awful, sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, which Tom found to be just as bad. Worse, though, was the thought that Hannah was gone forever, that he would never see her again. Shuddering, he told himself that this was a lie, that he would really wake up any instant.

There was a sudden burst of noise, and three people clambered through the doorway. Tom did not turn to look at them, staring into the fire avidly, as though looking for Hannah in there. The newcomers noticed him, and they hurried over, revealing themselves to be Adrian, Zuhayr, and Larkin. "Where've you been?" Larkin demanded. "You missed every lesson!"

"I'm getting the week off," Tom said vaguely, closing the book and setting it on a table. He explained what had happened, not really believing what he was saying, and his friends fell silent.

"I'm really sorry..." Zuhayr said slowly.

Tom did not answer. He got up and stormed out of the common room and up to the dormitory. He felt miserable beyond belief. Hannah had always been something of a mother to him, he realized. It was like losing his mother twice, except the first time it had not been bad because he was only a baby.

Tom stood before the mirror, his hands in his robe pockets. It was a lie, he thought, it had to be a lie. The Headmaster was mistaken, he had told Tom about some other death. Someone named Anna Hibby, probably, or something equally ludicrous. No, Hannah was not dead. People like Hannah did not suddenly die like that, the world did not work that way.

The mirror suddenly spoke to him, and for a moment, Tom was terrified to see the red-eyed face again. However, it turned out just to be the spirit of the mirror. "Why the long face, dear?" the mirror wheezed.

"I don't want to talk about it," Tom said shortly. With that, he whipped open the drapes of his bed and fell onto it, not bothering to change into his pajamas. A few seconds later, however, he heard something tapping on the lattice windows. Tom hurried over and opened them, and a small owl fluttered into the room.

Tom untied the note from its leg, fed it a bit of cracker, and sent it off. The note was in handwriting Tom had never seen before, tight and loopy. Reading it made a lump rise in his throat.

Tom-

I heard what happened. Annie Lewis just told me. I am so, so sorry. I'm sorry for everything my House has done to you, and I assure you I did not participate. I can sympathize, Tom, I really can. I lost my mum last year, and it was awful. You'll get through it. Don't worry.

PS: For what it's worth, I think you're a killer flier.

7. The Parselmouth

Tom was no less than miserable for ages. When he first started classes again, he studied as hard as ever, but rarely volunteered information. He spent most of his time looking as lost as he had in his orphanage days, avoiding human contact as much as he could. By mid-November, he had almost completely abandoned his social life, pouring all his energy into schoolwork. Nearly every day, he would turn in a pile of extra credit for each class, and he had yet to receive a grade below a perfect score.

The others thought he was only trying to show off, but Tom studied because it dulled the pain. When he was thinking about the twelve uses of dragon's blood, Tom did not have to remember that his first true friend was dead. When his nose was not in a book, he was despondent. His friends forgave him his taciturnity, but they did find him to be rather depressing as a companion. He never talked about his sadness, but he hid his grief so poorly that it was obvious he was thinking it.

As Tom slipped farther and farther away from humans, he found himself spending more time in the company of animals and ghosts. He would talk to Nepenthe for hours on end, and whenever he had free time, he would wander the halls and look for specters. Tom quickly gained popularity among the ghosts. Even Sir Nicholas de Mimsy Porpington, the Gryffindor ghost, liked to chat with Tom on occasion. Tom's favorite ghost was not the Bloody Baron, but the Grey Lady, a silent, elegant female ghost. She would only speak to Tom, and whenever she did, she would tell beautiful, sad stories in her chimelike voice.

"You really should be a Ravenclaw," the Grey Lady told him once. She was the Ravenclaw ghost, and was amazed at Tom's House assignment. "You understand me. Most people do not."

In fact, Tom found himself understanding far more ghosts than anyone else could. Some ghosts remained invisible all the time, but Tom could see them all. He trained himself to see them all. He was fond of the ghosts, for most of them reassured him, telling him that Hannah was either happy as a ghost or resting in peace. Some of the ghosts were horrible, though, not because of their personalities but because of the way they had died. Tom knew a ghost (whom he dubbed the "Lonely One") who looked as though he had been only seventeen or eighteen at death. In any case, the young ghost had had his face dreadfully mangled in the fire that killed him, and he had no cheeks connecting his cheekbones to his jaws. His mouth hung open all the time, and the other invisible ghosts hated him. Ghosts like that made Tom feel lucky.

Eventually, Tom began to accept everything. When he saw the unhappy ghosts wandering around without heads or missing limbs, Tom knew that Hannah was at least better off than they were.

By the first of December, Tom was almost back to normal. He finally started talking again, to everyone's relief, and he relaxed a little when it came to his studies. He still got perfect scores on everything, still turned in extra credit often, but he could spend his time doing other things without feeling awful. He began to enjoy his school life again, and was soon able to smile and laugh once more. However, his friends noticed that he remained rather aloof, and he would not mention Hannah if he could help it.

His friends thought he was reserved because he had been embittered by the angst he had gone through, but the truth was, he was afraid to get too close to anybody. The risk that one of them could die was too great, and Tom never wanted to feel that anguish again. He turned his back on most affection, and though he continued to like his friends, he never allowed himself to love.

Tom's twelfth birthday would be the twelfth of December. He had never had a very good birthday, and most of them (courtesy Gregory and Mr. Carney) were hellish. Because of Francis and Philip, the prospects for this one were equally gloomy. Philip refused to stop calling Tom "Pun." Francis, in addition to calling Tom "Mudblood" constantly, had taken to referring to him as "Hamlet" because of his previous brooding. Tom's friends always had to restrain him to prevent him from attacking the two of them.

On the eleventh of December, Tom woke up with a start at six o'clock. He had had the dream again, only it was more vivid this time, and the reflection had taken less time to transform. By the time he got down to breakfast, he was still shaking, and he looked stricken and pale. Tom noticed that Professor Dumbledore was looking at him oddly, with a mixture of concern and slight suspicion. Tom forced a small smile and started on his French toast, not feeling well at all.

"Are you all right, Tom?" the Professor asked. The Slytherin table was directly adjacent to the staff table, and Tom had seated himself on the end nearest the teachers. Tom looked up, swallowing hard.

"I just had a bad dream, that's all," he laughed nervously. Professor Dumbledore continued to give him that strange, penetrating stare. Tom tried not to let it bother him, but could not help but think that his teacher either disliked him or thought there was something seriously wrong with him. What was the matter with having nightmares, anyway? Tom could not understand why people thought trivial things like nightmares and being left-handed meant anything at all.

Tom had barely had time to eat another bite when someone tapped him on the shoulder. Tom saw that it was Philip Cedric, and a surge of hot hatred washed over him. Philip was grinning broadly, which Tom knew could not be a good sign. "Do you have something you need?" Tom demanded, surprised at the coldness in his own voice but not doing anything to curb it.

"Heard your best friend died, Pun." Tom's hand went to his wand, but Philip did not notice. "Was she Squib or Mudblood? Because I know you would never actually associate yourself with proper witches--"

"*Hakirris Machar!*" Tom cried, and a jet of red light shot out of his wand. It hit Philip in the stomach, and he doubled up, clutching his mouth and retching.

Professor Dumbledore rushed over from the high table to aid his student. Philip was now burping slugs, which were dribbling down his robes. "There isn't a counter curse, Philip, you should just get along to the hospital wing," Professor Dumbledore said, while the Slytherins quaked with silent laughter. Only Tom was not amused, and this was because he was clearly still furious. He was glaring at Philip with the deepest of loathing. "An explanation if you please, Mr. Riddle," Professor Dumbledore commanded.

"He insulted Hannah, Professor," Tom responded, amid the giggles and snorts of his fellows.

Professor Dumbledore's frown softened slightly. "I see. Well, I can't let you off for cursing a student, Tom, but considering the circumstances... Let's make it five points from Slytherin." Tom sighed with relief as Professor Dumbledore walked away.

Larkin and Annie turned up just then, tousle-haired and yawning. "You're up early, Tom," Annie sighed.

"And already busy," a second-year girl chuckled. "He just cursed that Cedric rat from Gryffindor. Gave him the Slug Curse like it was nothing!"

Sir Nicholas, who was breezing past, gave Tom a very hurt look and stormed away. Tom buried his face in his hands. "I'm having a very bad day," he moaned to his friends. "Don't talk to me; my luck, or lack thereof, will rub off on you. If you'll excuse me, I have to go apologize to Nick." Tom got up sharply and hurried off, leaving most of his breakfast unfinished. "Nick!" he called. "Nick, wait up!"

The Gryffindor ghost sped up and walked through a solid wall, leaving Tom alone in the entrance hall. Tom sat down heavily on the marble staircase, staring at his shoes and feeling awful; upset because of the dream, angry because of Philip, and sad because of Nicholas, sad because of so many things. He had the feeling today was going to get worse as it went on.

Tom's prediction was, unfortunately, as good as its word. In Herbology, Tom had to work at a Mimblewug with a group consisting entirely of Ravenclaws: Sven Kristiansen, Christine Laughlan, and Lili Po. Lili, who was shy and quiet, was not the problem. Sven and Christine, however, quite made up for Lili's lack of enthusiasm. They kept on calling him names Tom would never allow himself to repeat. Apparently, they were either still angry about Francis calling them fatheads or they liked Philip Cedric. In any case, they were so awful Tom had to put all his energy into keeping his left hand away from his wand.

Lili, ironically, seemed very upset by all of it. Every time Christine or Sven made a comment, she would give Tom a pitying look and bite her lip, blushing with embarrassment. When the other two were not looking, Lili passed him a note, in very tidy, loopy, tight penmanship.

I'm sorry. Please don't think I'm at all like those two. They're just jealous. I think you're talented, no matter what the others say. Just ignore them.

Tom scrutinized the note closely. There was something oddly familiar about it, but he could not figure out what. He did not have the time to let this flummox him, however, for he had his section of the Mimblewug to sap.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was boring, for once. Professor Xavier gave them an enormous pop quiz, which Tom aced in ten minutes. The other children had considerable trouble, and Tom had to spend two hours watching the others write, his chin in his hands. The first snow had begun to fall, and the swirl of white outside prevented Tom from even gazing out onto the grounds.

With Transfiguration came the usual, hands-on lesson, but Tom hated it. Professor Dumbledore was still looking at him suspiciously. It was probably because of Philip, Tom mused, turning beetle after beetle into shiny black coat buttons. Professor Dumbledore was still angry because of Philip. That had to be it. Tom could not think of any other reason for his teacher to keep looking at him like he was a bomb ready to detonate.

Charms with the Hufflepuffs was a horrible experience. After learning Hover Charms, Professor Flitwick paired them up so that they could practice on each other. He made the mistake of partnering Tom to Francis Malfoy, who gave a vindictive smile as Tom edged toward his desk. "Heard what you did to that Gryffindor, Hamlet," he snarled. "Didn't know a Mudblood could do that kind of thing."

"Well, I didn't know a pureblood could fail in every single class, but the proof of that possibility is standing before me," Tom replied silkily. "I'm not having a very good day, Francis, so if I were you, I wouldn't get on my bad side. After all, based on your grade point average, you shouldn't be wasting precious study time belching slugs in sick bay."

Francis glared at him. They continued through the lesson grumpily. Tom managed to levitate the shorter boy in the first minute, but Francis had an immense amount of trouble with the charm. "You're pronouncing it incorrectly," Tom informed him coldly, but Francis paid no attention, and spent the rest of the class gloating and insulting instead of working. Tom left the room ahead of everybody else, eager for dinner. He did not have any real homework, so his evening, at least, was free.

"*Diffindo!*" Francis cried behind him. Tom heard his bookbag split at the seams. His books tumbled out, and the cap came off of his inkbottle, sending emerald-green splashes all over the floor. A couple of people helped him pick up his things, and when Tom looked up, he realized that they were both Hufflepuffs. One was a boy with thick glasses and brown hair by the name of Arthur Jiro, and the other was a blonde girl named Sara Harbin.

"That jerk," Sara muttered. "Here, Tom. Is this your diary?"

Tom looked at the little black book. He had taken to carrying it around with him, in case he ever fancied to begin writing in it, but it was still blank. Tom shrugged, and thanked Sara as she handed it to him. He repaired his bookbag with a wave of his wand, likewise put his ink back in its bottle, and gathered up his belongings. "Thanks for helping," he said. He rounded on Francis, who was standing with Richard Zabini and roaring with laughter. "Quite witty of you, I must say," he snapped sardonically.

"Are you trying to start something, Riddle?"

"No, but you clearly are," Tom spat. "I will take no part in it, Francis. I'm going to dinner." He spun on his heel and left the scene, his face burning at the cackling behind him.

"Watch your step, Mudblood!" Francis called.

Tom sat up late in the common room, Nepenthe coiled around his neck. He was staring into the fire, still feeling extremely peeved. "I hate him," Tom hissed to Nepenthe. "I hate the two of them, Philip and Francis both. Why can't they just die? Nobody wants them here anyway."

"Ignore them," Nepenthe replied. "They are harmlessssss." Tom tutted and dismissed the idea with a wave of his willowy hand. Nepenthe made a noise of exasperation. "You cannot do anything to hurt them, not right under the noses of a dozen teachers."

"I can curse them," Tom said petulantly, pulling a piece of yarn from the afghan on his chair and hurling it into the fire. "I'm good at that."

"A cursssse is one thing. You were talking about murder." Nepenthe's voice was more serious than Tom had heard it ere now. Tom forced a laugh which was not his own.

"Am I not allowed to fantasize, dear Nepenthe? I'm just rambling. They make me so angry sometimes."

Nepenthe slithered down Tom's arm and rested his chin on the back of his master's hand. "You need to get over that temper of yours," Nepenthe barked, and Tom was surprised nobody else heard this. "It will get you into trouble one day."

A sudden, piercing scream rent the quiet air. Tom spun around sharply, accidentally knocking Nepenthe to the floor. To his amazement, nobody else was confused or shocked. Most people were just continuing what they had been doing earlier, reading, studying. The voice came again, just as loud but actually forming words.

"NO! PLEASE, I'LL DO ANYTHING! NO, NO, NO!" Through the yelling, Tom heard a familiar snicker.

"Great, now put him in the box. That's it..." Francis chortled softly.

Tom acted quickly, stepping over an ottoman and trying to get closer to the wailing voice. The noise led him to Francis and Richard, who had their backs to him. "No, not that! Back, you evil--you--GET ME OUT OF HERE! HELP ME, HELP, HELP, HELP!" All the while, Francis and his friend were sniggering and whispering.

As Tom got closer, he could see over their shoulders, and he felt himself shudder with anger. They had a flesh-eating slug in a shoebox, and were trying to force a young garter snake into the box to meet the slug. Tom suspected that they were trying to fight the two creatures, which was positively cruel considering that the mollusk would eat any meat it could find. The source of the sobbing voice was immediately explained. The tiny snake, seeing Tom, began pleading piteously. Tom heard Nepenthe coming up behind him. "Go away, Nepenthe, I'll take care of it," Tom shouted. He shoved Richard out of the way, grabbed the garter snake, and tore back to his chair.

"Are you all right?" he asked the snake, checking its heartbeat frantically.

"The monsssster bit me," it replied meekly. "Ssssee? My tail." Tom realized that blood was spilling into his hands from a nasty cut in the garter snake's side. Nepenthe hurried over.

"Is she hurt?" Nepenthe asked fervently.

"I'll take care of her," Tom responded, taking out his wand. He tapped the snake's cut, mumbling, "*Ferula*." The snake was immediately bandaged. "You'll be okay now," Tom whispered soothingly, stroking the snake's head.

Francis and Richard appeared at his side, looking furious. "You ruined our game, you worthless Mudblood!" Francis sputtered, his face slightly pink.

Tom, the wee snake still clutched in his right hand, pointed his wand at Francis. His eyes were more fiery now than ever before. Tom wondered, briefly and vaguely, why he was so upset about a snake. Perhaps it was characteristic of Parselmouths to defend all serpents by instinct. Right now, Tom did not care about anything. "Get away, Malfoy. Now. Go away or I'll blast you to bits. Both of you," he added, and Richard gave a squeak. As they were walking away, Tom turned back to both snakes. "They won't hurt you anymore, little one," he said. "Off you go, now." He set the little snake on the floor, and it made for the nearest crack in the wall.

"That was rash," Nepenthe murmured. "You should not have sssspoken sso loudly." Tom was about to ask what Nepenthe meant, but he suddenly realized that the room was dead silent. He turned and looked over the back of his armchair, and saw that the eyes of the Slytherins were on him. Only a few were left, just a small set of first- and second-years, but those who remained looked like they had been given the shock of their lives.

Tom cleared his throat. "If any of you--ANY of you--tell anybody that I am a Parselmouth, I'll make sure that person gets the same as Philip Cedric." Even Francis and Richard nodded silently, their faces white. As Tom left the common room, he heard the multitude erupt with whispers. Somehow, however, he knew that nobody was about to tell.

8. The Writing in Green

Tom woke up on his birthday and was almost completely finished getting ready before he realized it was only four-thirty. He wondered vaguely what was the matter with his internal clock, but seeing as he was completely dressed, Tom decided he would just head down to the common room and do some reading before classes. As Tom passed Francis and Richard's beds, he paused. Richard was snoring peacefully, and Francis was murmuring softly in his slumber. Hearing both of their breathing made Tom furious. He had hoped they would die in the night so that he would not have to put up with them. He was still angry with them over the incidents of the previous night, and his temper seemed to have been stretched to the breaking point.

His eyes wandered over to his wand, which was sitting innocently in his belt. They were both asleep, it would be so easy. Coming to a conclusion, he drew out his wand and flung open the drapes of Richard's bed. "*Memorinix*," he whispered, hitting Richard with a Forgetfulness Spell. On a whim, he murmured, "*Triximarr*," and Richard shuddered slightly as the Clumsiness Curse impacted. Tom allowed himself a small smile. Richard would probably spend his day getting lost on the way to class and crashing into things. Tom gave the same treatment to Francis, and his smile grew wider. Nonchalantly, he pocketed his wand and hurried down to the common room.

The circular chamber was completely deserted except for a black kitten, who was pouncing on dust bunnies beside a loveseat. Tom knelt and petted it, and the kitten purred appreciatively. As he got to his feet, the kitten followed him to an armchair, and insisted upon sitting in his lap. Tom winced; the kitten's claws were digging into his thigh.

Tom rummaged in his bag and unearthed his secondhand copy of *Hogwarts: A History*, which he had still not finished. This was not surprising, for the pages numbered in the two thousands. As he opened it, he came upon a back section he had not known about. It contained biographies of each of the four founders, including moving portraits. Godric Gryffindor's biography was first. He was a brave-looking blond fellow with piercing grey eyes. Tom skimmed the passage and decided he liked Godric far more than his charges. Perhaps the poor man's house had gone to seed.

After glancing at Helga Hufflepuff's and Rowena Ravenclaw's articles, Tom flipped the page and found himself face to face with his ancestor. Salazar Slytherin had had the bluish black hair characteristic of his descendants. The face shape was quite different from Tom's, but this was probably because Salazar had been in his late twenties when the portrait was painted, as opposed to twelve years old. The eyes, however, were exactly the same.

Salazar Slytherin gave Tom a funny look, then a small smile. Tom tore his eyes away from the painting and began to read the life history with interest. Tom realized rather sympathetically that his ancestor had gone through a similarly hellish childhood, growing up in a marsh with adoptive Muggle parents. His Muggle stepfather sounded like a ten-times-worse Rupert Carney. Tom kept reading, watching as Slytherin's life, as well as Hogwarts, unfolded before his eyes. He learned that Slytherin and Gryffindor, though very close friends, were constantly bickering, and that Slytherin eventually left the school when the disagreements grew to be too much of a burden on their friendship.

At the end of the passage, there was a paragraph listing the things for which Slytherin was famous. One phrase caught Tom's eye and nearly made him choke. Not sure he had interpreted it correctly, he reread the following.

Perhaps Slytherin's most famous talent was his knowledge of Parseltongue, or the ability to talk to snakes. It was a trait he sought in his hand-picked pupils, but as far as the records show,

he was not able to find one in even his own family. Experts believe that Parselmouths are extremely rare, and that Salazar Slytherin may indeed have been the only one in recorded magical history.

So that was why everyone had been so shocked, Tom thought. If it was such a rare gift, it was perfectly understandable that they should be taken aback. However, this was interesting. Tom had not known that Slytherin himself was a Parselmouth. Tom closed the book slowly and looked up at the clock on the mantelpiece. It told him that it was six o'clock, and that Tom had been reading for an hour and a half.

Tom supposed that they might be serving breakfast already, so he headed down to the Great Hall, bookbag in hand. He was so busy thinking that he walked straight through the Slytherin ghost, the Bloody Baron. Tom shivered; touching a ghost felt like touching icy water. The Bloody Baron spun around to look at him. His eyes were blank, without pupils or irises, and his ghostly robes were splattered with silvery blood. "I offer my apologies, young Riddle," the Baron croaked, causing some more blood to trickle out of the slash in his throat.

"It's quite all right," Tom replied, though he felt more inclined to run away. This particular ghost made him extremely nervous, and Tom had still not dared to ask who--or what--had first drenched the Baron with blood. Tom forced a sunny smile and headed off to the Great Hall, but to his exasperation and anxiety, the Baron followed him.

"Is there something on your mind?" he asked, as drops of blood rolled down his front. Tom did his best not to watch, it was nauseating.

"Not really. I just want some breakfast." What a lie this was. Seeing the Baron speak drove away any appetite Tom might have had. The Bloody Baron was almost as bad as the Lonely One as grotesqueries went.

"You are up early."

"Yeah," Tom gulped, trying to avert his eyes but to no avail.

"That is imprudent, you need rest," the Baron chuckled. "You will probably be up past dawn tonight."

"Why?" Tom inquired.

The Baron tried to smile, but tensing the muscles in his cheeks caused nearly as much trouble as talking. "It is characteristic of Houses to celebrate their founders' birthdays, young Riddle."

It took a moment for the full momentum of this statement to hit him. When it did, Tom's bookbag tumbled out of his hands. He looked up at the Bloody Baron, wide-eyed. "It's Slytherin's birthday?" he gasped. When the Baron nodded, Tom's face went deathly pale. Hurriedly, he gathered up his books and fled down the marble staircase.

Larkin, as usual, was at breakfast early, twirling a bunch of her bushy black hair around her finger and drawing caricatures on a scrap of parchment. As she saw Tom enter, she gave him a curious look. She had been among the first-years still awake on the previous night, and she knew about Tom's strange gift. Unlike some of the others, however, Larkin thought that it was a brilliant talent to have, and she promptly ambushed him.

"Hey, serpent-tongue," she whispered, grinning from ear to ear.

"Quiet!" Tom snapped, his voice higher than usual and his eyes on the staff table. Professor Dumbledore was deep in conversation with the Headmaster, thankfully. Tom noticed that instead of his usual grey robes, Professor Chapman was wearing deep green. Tom guessed it was in honor of the occasion, and he went even paler.

"I once knew someone who died from eating poisoned eggs," Larkin smirked, just as Tom was lifting his egg-filled fork to his mouth. Tom glared at her, and she positively beamed. "You're cranky today," she said cheerfully. "Listen, don't let the others get you down. I think it's neat. I mean, Slytherin himself--"

"I KNOW!" Tom barked, so loudly that a couple of Hufflepuffs across the hall gave him quizzical looks. "Sorry," he added, as Larkin leered at him. At that moment, a seventh-year girl arrived at the table, a box in her hands.

The girl had hair of a dark blonde color, and she had green and silver ribbons woven into it. "I'm giving out pendants," she said importantly. "Emerald ones with silver snakes wrapped around them. See?" She held up an amulet on a black string. "Everyone take one. We're showing our colors today!" Larkin seized one and immediately got the string tangled in her extremely shaggy hair. All the other Slytherins took them, and Professor Chapman claimed one, too, praising the seventh-year on her craftsmanship.

"I'm sure Professor Dippet would like a set for each of the Houses, Miss Embers," he informed her, and the girl swelled with pride. Professor Chapman turned to Tom, who was looking distinctly ill and was pallid as a ghost. "You all right, Mr. Riddle?" he asked, concerned.

"It's my birthday," Tom murmured, so that only Professor Chapman could hear. Sharing a birthday with a Hogwarts founder had to be quite unusual, and the fact that he was a Parselmouth was just too much. If people knew about both, they might sense a connection, and his secret would be out of the bag. Professor Chapman looked surprised.

"Really? Your birthday?" To Tom's horror, the professor was speaking in a normal tone. "Well, happy birthday, Tom." The Potions master headed back to the staff table. Larkin whirled on him.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded indignantly. "I could have bought you something!" Tom sighed with relief. Larkin would not bother to put two and two together, so at least she would not know.

As Tom was finishing breakfast, the rest of the students lumbered down to the meal. Tom noticed that neither Richard nor Francis had come down at all. A few of the Slytherins shot him inquisitive glances, but none of them seemed especially afraid. Tom got to his feet and left the hall, not keen on striking up a conversation with anybody. He heard Betty Embers, the seventh-year, hawking her talismans to the new arrivals.

"Perhaps I'll go to History of Magic early," Tom thought, but he dismissed this idea quickly. He would have been over two hours ahead of schedule, and wonderful though Professor Twiddly might be, Tom thought she might think there was something wrong with him if he turned up that soon.

As Tom wandered the halls wondering what to do with his time, he happened upon Francis and Richard. He had to stifle a laugh. They were weaving heavily, as though deeply intoxicated, and had bewildered looks on their faces. Richard's robes were on both backwards and inside out, and Francis walked right into a statue, adding to the number of bruises and cuts he already had from previous accidents. "Feeling all right?" Tom asked, fighting away his grin.

"Yeah," Richard prattled, a bemused look on his face. "Just fine. I don't know what's wrong with me today, but I'll get over it." He hiccupped loudly.

"Thanks for your consideration, erm--what's your name?" Francis cocked his head and tried to remember Tom's name. "Jimmy, yeah! Thanks, Jimmy, we owe you one. Now we need to get along to Potions, so see you later!" As they left, Tom heard them debating where they had seen him before. Richard insisted Tom was a second-year Hufflepuff, while Francis was sure "Jimmy" was a Gryffindor prefect. Tom watched them collide a few times before they managed to turn a corner, and he could not conceal a laugh.

After meandering for the rest of the breakfast period, Tom headed toward History of Magic, arriving even before Professor Twiddly. The Slytherins had a very entertaining lesson, for today they were reenacting a goblin rebellion. The teacher assigned each student to a group of tamed Cornish Pixies and led them out onto the snow, where they had a riotous good time directing the electric blue creatures in battle. Francis and Richard finally found the rest of the class halfway through the lesson, and they crashed into so many people that Professor Twiddly had to drag them to the sidelines where they could not hurt anybody.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was equally interesting. The students were taking notes on the behavior of a hinkypunk in a glass tank, and Professor Xavier told them that they would be moving on to grindylows after Christmas holidays. Richard became so excited by this that he fell out of his chair, taking with him a bottle of black ink, which splattered all over Serena Birch's shoes. Tom watched this operation with amusement, and the class roared with laughter as Richard finally returned to his seat. There was a large, inky boot-print on his forehead where Serena had kicked him, though Richard had already forgotten she had done it.

"Wonder what's wrong with him," Adrian chortled as he left the class with Tom. "He and Francis have been acting like idiots ever since breakfast. I mean, more like idiots than usual."

"Naturally," Tom replied coolly. "You know I don't let people get away with making me mad." Adrian stared at him, then snickered uncontrollably, causing a passing line of Ravenclaws to give him funny looks. Adrian continued to giggle until they reached the Transfiguration classroom. Professor Dumbledore was waiting there.

"Do try and control yourself, Mr. Müller," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. Adrian smirked and hurried into the classroom. Tom wondered whether Professor Dumbledore had heard Professor Chapman say it was Tom's birthday.

The rest of the class was trying to turn pencils into earthworms, but Professor Dumbledore gave Tom a harder assignment when he was finished, so as not to let the boy grow bored. "I want you to try to turn your desk into a baby hippopotamus," Dumbledore informed him. "Good luck." Tom, who had been practicing, managed this transformation in only a few minutes, and Professor Dumbledore gave up and told him to read for the rest of the period.

After class, Professor Dumbledore pulled Tom aside. "Tom, I can't avoid this anymore. Your talents are simply too far above Ordinary Wizarding Level for you to continue in this particular class." Tom began to protest, but the teacher held up a hand to silence him. "I think that maybe you should begin to take Transfiguration with the sixth-years. God knows you are already at that level."

"What happens when I'm in my third year?" Tom asked. "I'll have gone through the whole curriculum by then, right?"

"Then I'll have to begin tutoring you on the most advanced forms of Transfiguration. You're especially bright, you know, probably more sophisticated than any other student in recent memory. My guess is you'll become one of the most famous Transfiguration experts in the wizarding world. You certainly have the potential." Tom felt himself go red. He tried to smile at Professor Dumbledore, but his face fell when he saw that his teacher was not smiling back. Dumbledore was looking at him oddly, the same way Mr. Ollivander had looked at Tom when he had discovered that Tom was left-handed. It was a calculating, piercing stare that made Tom feel extremely self-conscious.

"Is there something wrong?" Tom could not resist asking.

Dumbledore shook his head. "You had better go, Tom, you'll be late for Charms and Professor Flitwick will be after my blood. Hurry, now, off you trot." Tom obeyed, asking himself all the while why he got the impression Dumbledore disliked him.

When Tom got to dinner, the Great Hall was decked out in silver and green, the Slytherin House colors. The Ravenclaws, who seemed to have finally forgiven all of the Slytherins except for Francis, were acting rather friendly for the first time in ages. Tom took a seat at the end of the Slytherin table, two feet away from the beginning of the Ravenclaw eating area. Larkin sat near him. She tried to tame her wild hair, but all she managed to do was tangle it more. Lili arrived a few seconds later, and Tom was sure her eyes flicked in his direction before she took a seat directly across the aisle.

The meal appeared on the table, and Tom immediately helped himself to a large portion. He had spent lunchtime in the library and had not eaten since breakfast. Francis and Richard kept missing their mouths with their forks, instead hitting themselves in the face, forgetting they had done it, and repeating the action. The other Slytherins chatted happily, but Tom did not join in. He was too busy watching Professor Dumbledore. The Transfiguration instructor was talking jovially to little Professor Flitwick, but every now and then, his blue eyes would wander over to where Tom was sitting, and his expression would turn into something indiscernible.

"I don't think it's a bad thing, Tom," Larkin shrugged when he asked her for her opinion. "He just hasn't seen anyone as good as you are before, and it gives him the collywobbles. I mean, your head's practically pulsating from all the grey matter."

"I'll choose to take that as a compliment," Tom sighed, turning back to his baked potato. Larkin laughed and began chattering away to Zuhayr. Somehow, Tom did not think that Dumbledore acted oddly around him because he thought he was too brainy for belief. What could it be, though? Tom liked Dumbledore well enough, and he did not like the idea of having one of his favored teachers hating him.

All through dinner, Tom kept his eye on Professor Dumbledore, itching to be blunt and demand an explanation but too shy to do it. He trudged up to Slytherin Tower in very low spirits, while all the Slytherins around him discussed the upcoming party. Tom spotted the Bloody Baron lurking on a stairwell, deep in conversation with Peeves the Poltergeist, who was bowing and speaking in an oily voice. The boy turned away, flinching. The Bloody Baron had just coughed, which caused what looked like a liter of blood to come out of his neck, and Tom did not want to watch.

The Slytherins piled into the common room, their talk growing more excited. Tom did not much feel like taking part in the festivities, so he selected an armchair away from the crowd and started to read a library book. After about fifteen minutes, a couple of very bright-faced fourth-years returned from the school kitchens laden with snacks and bottles of butterbeer. The congregation

cheered and a prefect began to distribute the snacks. He set a butterbeer and a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans on the side table next to Tom, and Tom thanked him, returning to his book. Larkin spotted him.

"Good Lord, Tom, do you ever do anything besides read?" she asked, looking quite mortified. "Come on, it's your birthday, you should take part in the party." A few people nearby gave Tom surprised looks, but Tom did not notice. He absorbed himself in the book, never once looking up for several hours.

The grandfather clock sounded twelve times, signaling midnight. At the instant that the last chime rang out, the lights suddenly and inexplicably went out. Tom looked up sharply, but without purpose. The common room was pitch-black. He heard several girls scream, and the rest were whispering and panicking. "Oh, this is stupid," Tom said. "*Lumos!*" A light appeared at the tip of his wand, casting a greenish glow on everything within five feet. Several people followed his lead, and the common room slowly came into half-view.

"What happened?" someone asked. The only light in the room came from the wands; even the fire in the grate had gone. Equally unexpectedly, the light of the wands flickered out as well. Tom stared at his wand. He had never known it to malfunction before. A sudden scream brought him back to earth, and he looked around for the cause of the cry. As his eyes reached the ceiling, he saw what was wrong, and he had to stifle a shout.

Large, shimmering green words had formed on the ceiling for all to see. ""The circle is complete,"" Tom read aloud in a shaking voice. "Let the games begin." There was a roaring noise resembling thunder, and the lights came back. As the hearth and torches were bestowed their flame once more, the green words vanished in a puff of smoke.

9. Poinsettia and Lili

The Slytherins were all late to breakfast the next day. They arrived tousle-haired and whispering, rosy and bright-eyed as though they had not slept a wink but did not care at all. Indeed, none of them had slept. They had stayed up all night, searching the common room for the culprit and puzzling over what the message meant. Tom had observed this but had not taken part, not because he did not have ideas but because he was too stunned to speak his mind. "What happened to you lot?" a Ravenclaw boy asked. The Slytherins exchanged glances, laughed nervously, and sat down. None of them wanted to explain the situation to the Ravenclaws.

Tom sighed inwardly. They had drawn straws, and somehow he had got stuck with the job of telling the Headmaster everything. To make matters worse, Professor Dippet was talking to Dumbledore. Professor Dumbledore would hear everything from Tom instead of from Dippet later. Tom had no idea why this made his legs feel like jelly, but it did. Once all the others were seated, Tom took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, and walked up to the staff table.

"...really quite an amusing situation," Dippet was saying cheerfully to Dumbledore. "So then I told him--"

"Headmaster Dippet?" Tom piped up, his face rather pink. He truly hated to talk to Dippet in front of Professor Dumbledore.

"Yes, Mr. Riddle?"

Tom's face went even pinker. In a rush, he described the events, staring at the floor so he could not see all the eyes that were resting on him, particularly a set of blue ones. There was complete silence at the staff table, and Tom forced himself to look up. Professor Dippet was looking quite nonplussed, as were most of the teachers. Professor Dumbledore, however, looked shocked and furious. There was no trace of a sparkle in his eyes now, and he was gazing at Tom in disbelief.

"Why didn't you come to a teacher right after it happened?" Dumbledore asked finally, fixing the younger wizard in a penetrating stare. His voice was soft, and Tom thought it would have been better if he had shouted it.

"I--" Tom quailed under Dumbledore's stare. "It wasn't my fault!" he whispered. "It really wasn't-I didn't know it was anything important, really, I would have come straight away if I'd known it was something critical!" Tom could tell that he looked as guilty as sin, chewing his lower lip and staring back at Professor Dumbledore, clearly terrified. There was something about the way Dumbledore was looking at him that made him want to shrivel up and die. Tom never cried, but right now he felt very near tears.

Dumbledore seemed to be pondering this. "I see. Do you have any idea who sent up the message?" he demanded. Perhaps it was paranoia, but Tom was sure his teacher was accusing him.

"No--please, I didn't have anything to do with it! I swear I would never do that!" As though observing from one of the nearby tables, Tom could see himself, visibly shuddering and quite near hysterics. He told himself to snap out of it, but he could not. "I would never do anything of the sort, Professor, I promise I wouldn't! It wasn't me! Please believe me!"

Some of the anger left Dumbledore's eyes, replaced immediately by concern. "I wasn't suggesting that you did it, Tom," he said hurriedly, seeing the look on Tom's face. He had gone from

flushed to extremely pale, and his eyes were like blue-green tea saucers. Dippet chose this time to cut in.

"Er--thank you, Mr. Riddle, we'll send some people to your common room to find the cause of the trouble," the Headmaster said. "Get back to breakfast, now."

Instead of going to breakfast, Tom made for the entrance hall. He sank to a seat on the marble staircase and slapped himself hard, still breathing very fast. His face felt wet, and it took him a few seconds to realize he had tears coursing down his cheeks. Tom hurriedly wiped off his face with a handkerchief, but it did not do much good, for the old tears were replaced by new ones.

"Look at you," cackled a nasty little voice in his brain. "You're acting like a little girl. Better not let Francis or Philip see you like this, they'll die laughing."

After a minute or two, the double doors of the Great Hall flew open, and Professor Dumbledore stepped over the threshold. Tom did not notice; he had given up on restraint and was sobbing whole-heartedly into his hands. Dumbledore spotted him and walked over. Tom only looked up when the teacher sat next to him, and when he did, he noticed that Dumbledore did not seem remotely angry with him now.

"Tom, I'd like to apologize. I realize I probably made it seem like I was mad at you."

"You were," Tom snapped, rather more coldly than he would have liked.

"I was not. The news you brought--it was startling, and not at all good. That was what upset me, not you. Perhaps I asked my questions too sharply?" Tom nodded, and Professor Dumbledore gave a small smile. "For that, I am sorry. As long as you understand that I did not accuse you of anything, I'll leave you alone now." Dumbledore got to his feet and started to leave.

"Professor?" Dumbledore paused. "That message--what does it mean, exactly?"

Professor Dumbledore stared at Tom for a moment. "I won't say it doesn't pertain to you," he said slowly, "but if I were you, I'd let the adults worry about it."

Later on in the week, Zuhayr's older sister (a Hufflepuff, and this year's Head Girl) Akiva Sahabjira took down the names of the people who wanted to stay at Hogwarts during the Christmas holidays. Tom made sure to get his name onto the list, but he was one of the few who did. Only two other Slytherins put down their names; Annie Lewis and her elder brother, Matthew, a sixth-year prefect. Tom strongly suspected the siblings had done this so that he would not be lonely.

He had signed up to stay at Hogwarts for two reasons. The main reason was obvious. Nobody in his or her right mind would voluntarily spend time back at the Whitechapel Home for Orphans, particularly not Tom. His Christmases there had always been horrible. The best one by far had been when he was nine. Hannah had scraped up enough money to buy him a box of his first-ever chocolates, and Mr. Carney had been ill with the flu. Tom's worst day at Hogwarts would be twelve times more enjoyable than his best back in Whitechapel.

The other reason Tom was staying at Hogwarts was that he had some things he needed to study other than schoolwork, and he was sure he could not find the correct books in a Muggle library. From the tone of Dumbledore's voice, he could tell that the message in the common room had meant something very important, and Tom was dying to know what. In his free-time, Tom could usually be found in the library with an enormous pile of books in front of him, flipping through

the index and searching for the words "circle" and "games." None of the books had the right answer, and what Tom needed was some time to search the whole library, away from the worries of homework and classes.

It seemed to Tom that the only hitch in the plan was that Dumbledore was staying at the castle as well. Tom had grown prickly toward the Transfiguration teacher since the episode back on the thirteenth, and though he continued to act perfectly normally around Professor Dumbledore, Tom's feelings were usually bitter. Tom had not cried since he was three years old, and that was when he had had his first-ever beating.

The thing that infuriated Tom was that Dumbledore had managed to bring him to tears just by looking at him. In nine years, he had trained himself never to cry, and all that had collapsed--just because Professor Dumbledore had looked angry. There had been something in his eyes, something that made Tom want to stay on Dumbledore's good side if he liked the way his face was shaped. Though Tom did not know it, during Dumbledore's brief career as an Auror, that very glare had brought many fully-grown, hardened Dark wizards to their knees. Nonetheless, the truth stood that Tom had been terrified into hysterics, just because Dumbledore had looked at him. It made him feel like a weakling, which enraged him.

Indeed, it appeared to be a problem. After vacation began, Tom started spending all of his time in the library--and so did Dumbledore. He seemed to be trying to keep an eye on him, as though making sure Tom did not do exactly what he was doing. On the twenty-second of December, Dumbledore abandoned all pretense and walked right up to him. Tom was sitting at one of the tables in a squashy armchair, flipping through book after book but finding nothing.

"Tom?"

"What?" Tom looked up sharply, and his face drained of color when he saw who was talking to him. "P-P-Professor! I--erm, I was just--uh--researching..."

"The meaning of the message?" Dumbledore finished for him, eyes twinkling. "However pleased I am that you are taking interest in something besides schoolwork, I would prefer you not to research this particular subject. Is that understood?"

"I wouldn't have to research it if you told me," Tom said slyly. Dumbledore's mustache twitched.

"Quite shrewd, aren't you? Nice try, Tom." Tom narrowed his eyes. "You should be in your common room, Mr. Riddle. I bid you good day." Reluctantly, Tom got to his feet and started for the door.

"*Accio!*" Dumbledore said. Tom felt the book he had been smuggling out fly out of his bookbag. "This wouldn't have helped you, anyway," his professor smiled, holding up the history book. "I think we'll make it ten points from Slytherin," he added sternly. "And don't try it again."

Fuming, Tom stormed out of the library. When he got to the Slytherin common room, he saw Annie and Matthew playing wizard chess at a nearby table. "Checkmate!" Matthew cried triumphantly.

Annie gave him a withering look. "Some accomplishment," she said, "beating someone five years younger." Matthew laughed, and Annie spotted Tom lingering near the portrait hole. "Hi, Tom," she called. "Did you find out what that message meant yet?"

"Dumbledore stopped me," Tom replied with a groan. "In any case, I'm starting to think that maybe the--er, *open* section of the library does not have the answer."

"What d'you--"

"Think about it, Matthew. That message was obviously some form of Dark magic." Tom noticed that the siblings shuddered slightly at the thought. "They don't have any books on Dark magic in the library except for the Restricted Section. I think that's where I have to go."

Annie looked panicked. "Oh, Tom, *don't*, you'll get yourself into trouble," she said. "Mr. Lamont would probably have a fit if he caught anyone in the Restricted Section." Mr. Lamont was the librarian, and a very ill-tempered one, at that.

"I know. I'll have to figure out a way to get in there legitimately. If all else fails, I can always sneak in there at night."

Annie started to protest again, but her brother stopped her. "Let's go for a fly," Matthew said. "It's okay for students to borrow school broomsticks and ride around the grounds."

"You boys go ahead," Annie said irritably. "I'm staying right here." The boys nodded and pulled on their cloaks over their robes.

As they left the common room, Matthew beamed at Tom. "Good thing she's not coming," he said. "She can't fly worth beans. We'd be spending half the time rescuing her." They headed down to the entrance hall, which looked terribly large without its usual mass of students. The air outside was colder than anything Tom had ever experienced, and he was very thankful for his cloak.

After trudging across the snowy grounds to the broomshed, Matthew seized a Comet Twenty, and Tom selected a Nimbus One Hundred. It took them a good two minutes to realize they were not alone in the shed. "Hello," a voice said. Tom whirled around to see Lili Po standing in the corner, a broomstick over her shoulder.

"Hi," Tom greeted. "Lili, right?"

"Yes. And you're Tom Riddle." Lili grinned. She had satiny black hair that fell down to her waist, and very dark brown eyes. If Tom had had any interest in girls, he would have thought her extremely pretty. "We have Herbology together, remember?"

Tom nodded. "Matthew and I were just about to go for a fly around the school, so I'll see you around."

"Actually, I was about to do the same thing. Maybe we could go as a group."

"Okay," Tom replied immediately. "Let's go." The three of them headed out onto the snowy grounds once more.

"Tom," Matthew said in an undertone, "she's a *Ravenclaw*. Slytherins and Ravenclaws don't hang around together. They're all mean to us."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Not all of them are bad, Matthew, honestly. Lili's one of the nice ones." He turned around and helped Lili up; she had tripped on the hem of her too-large purple cloak.

When they reached a nice hard patch of ground, all three hopped onto their broomsticks and kicked off from the ground. Tom was immediately overtaken by the sense of euphoria, and he did a couple of loop-the-loops before jetting after the other two. Lili was watching, apparently impressed. "So it wasn't beginner's luck, after all," she called.

"What do you mean?"

Lili blushed. "Well, I have Transfiguration on Thursdays at nine o'clock. The Transfiguration classroom looks out over the lake, and one day I happened to look out the window, and I saw you flying. You were really good."

"Really? Thanks."

"Anyway, it seems you haven't lost your touch." Lili was not all that bad herself, Tom thought. She managed hairpin turns like they were nothing, and her balance was flawless.

The threesome did a few laps around the castle, then flew over the Forbidden Forest. Tom and Lili were chatting all the while, and Tom could tell that Matthew felt left-out. After a while, Matthew told them he was going to go back to the common room, and Tom felt a pang of guilt. He truly had not meant to exclude the other boy, but Lili was undeniably a more interesting companion.

"Fancy a game of catch, Tom?" Lili asked a few minutes after Matthew had gone. She pulled a small orange out of her cloak pocket and tossed it to him. He dove a few feet and caught it superbly, quickly hurling it back in her direction. This game lasted about an hour, until Tom caught the orange and tapped it with his wand. When he sent it in Lili's direction, it peeled itself by magic and fell apart into sections in her hands.

Without really knowing where the time had gone, Tom spent the rest of the day having a snowball fight, which was even more fun on broomsticks because there was the possibility of bombarding one's enemy with snow bombs from one hundred feet above. Before either of them knew it, dusk was falling.

"Oh dear... we should be getting in to supper now, shouldn't we?" Lili said, her face rosy.

Tom nodded. "They had better be serving something hot," he replied, landing on the snow-covered lawn. "I don't know why I didn't notice it, but I'm freezing." They returned their brooms to the broomshed, still talking animatedly, and by the time they got to the entrance hall, both were doubled up with laughter over one of Lili's jokes. They entered the Great Hall, still chortling, and the other students turned to stare at them. Besides the Lewises, Tom, and Lili, only three people were left; Lucy Chubb, Philip Cedric, and Rankin Prewitt, a burly fourth-year Hufflepuff. Because of the small number of students, the House tables had been abandoned and all of the students and teachers sat at the staff table, which had been enlarged to accommodate.

"So you finally got hungry after all," Professor Dippet said, staring at the two flushed, happy newcomers. "Have some of the pot roast, Mr. Riddle, it's utterly divine."

Tom accepted the pot roast, though it did not mean much. He was still conversing with Lili, and he barely noticed what he was eating. He also did not notice that Matthew looked slightly hurt, that Philip was whispering excitedly to Rankin, or that Lucy and Annie were both glaring at Lili with looks of utmost loathing on their faces.

On Christmas morning, Tom woke up to find that the dormitory had been decorated. There was holly bound to the posts of the four-posters, and a ribbon of gold ran along the ceiling. After about ten seconds, Annie and Matthew burst in. Both of them were wearing brand-new dress robes, and Annie had a red and green ribbon in her blood-red hair. "Hi, Tom!" the Lewises chorused. "Merry Christmas."

"You too," Tom said groggily. He stepped into his slippers and got up, but at that moment, he noticed a moderately sized pile of presents next to his trunk. "Uh... what're those?"

"Presents, silly," Matthew laughed. "All the Slytherins bought you stuff. Well, almost all of them." His blue eyes flicked over to Francis and Richard's empty beds.

Tom immediately panicked. He had not bought anything for anyone besides all of the first-year Slytherins and Lili. He had even gone so far as to send Francis and Richard presents... though, Tom thought mischievously, extra-grumpy copies of *The Monster Book of Monsters* could not exactly be considered gifts. "Oh dear," he sighed. "Matthew, I'm sorry, I didn't know I ought to get you anything. I'm really bad at Christmas."

Matthew shrugged. "Annie agreed to split that box of Chocolate Frogs you gave her with me," he said. "That'll do."

"Well, what're you waiting for?" Annie said, flopping down onto Adrian's bed. "Let's see what you got. Open the one from Matt and me first."

Tom rummaged through the pile and extracted a parcel labeled, "To Tom, from the Lewises." Inside was a small, black crystal spinning top filled with pearly white liquid. Annie explained that it was a Sneakoscope, and that it whistled and lit up when it detected treachery. Tom deliberately thought of the prank he had pulled on Richard and Francis, and the little spinning top suddenly began to spin very quickly. The pearly liquid glowed and screeched shrilly.

"It works," Tom grinned. "Thanks a lot."

The next package was from Larkin. She had sent him a bag of Gobstones. Zuhayr's contained a set of chessmen, and Adrian sent a box of moving, miniature model dragons. After a while, Tom spotted one that was wrapped in plain brown paper, and was addressed (incorrectly) in pencil as opposed to ink. Upon closer examination, he realized it was from the orphanage. He withdrew his usual grey sweater and a note from the new housekeeper telling him to behave himself at Smeltings. He supposed that Smeltings was the boarding school Hannah had told Mr. Carney that Tom attended.

"Is that from the Muggles?" Matthew asked, examining the sweater. "Why didn't they get you anything interesting?"

Tom shrugged and turned to the last two packages. One was from Lili, he could tell from the small, loopy penmanship. The other was not addressed at all. The present from Lili consisted of a book about the various types of ghosts and their characteristics. Tom gave a small smile, remembering how he had told her how fond he was of ghosts. It might have been Tom's imagination, but Annie's face fell slightly when she saw that Lili had bestowed him a gift.

Finally, he got to the unmarked parcel. It was wrapped in very dark brown paper, and Tom wondered if it was some sort of dangerous "present" from Francis. No, that did not fit. Anything from his rival would have been labeled "To the Mudblood" or "To Hamlet." This was not labeled at all.

"What's that?" Annie asked curiously, as Tom lifted it onto his bed and sat down beside it, staring at it.

"I'm not sure... Only one way to find out." He took hold of the edge of the paper and ripped it off. A black, leather-bound book fell onto the counterpane, accompanied by a poinsettia flower and a small note. He picked up the note first, and read aloud.

Tom Marvolo Riddle:

Messages are hard to interpret, aren't they? This could be the answer to your question... The answer to most of your questions, as a matter of fact. Oh, and this book and this note will evaporate if you try to tell a teacher, so I would not try it if I were you.

The note was not signed. Tom looked down at the book again, and nearly fainted when he read the title. *An Amateur's Guide to the Dark Arts*. "Oh my God," he said softly.

"What is it?" the Lewises asked in unison, too far off to see the words on the book's cover. Tom held up the book, and both of them gasped in shock. Tom's first impulse was to run and seek the help of the first teacher he came to, be it Professors Chapman, Dippet, or (God forbid) Dumbledore. Another glance at the note drove this from his mind promptly. He would look like an idiot or be accused of lying if he told them without evidence.

Tom crumpled the note and hurled it and the book into the fire, but they came right back out, smoking slightly but unburned. The original note had vanished, replaced by another one.

Nice try, Riddle.

You won't get rid of it that easily. I'm telling you, this book has the answer you have been searching for, the answer you have been craving ever since the thirteenth of December. We are giving you the interpretation. All you need to do is read it. Read it.

Tom was feeling distinctly ill now. He decided that he would take disbelief from the teachers over reading a book about the Dark Arts any day. Without explaining to Annie or Matthew, Tom tucked the book under his arm, clenched the note in his fist, and dashed away toward the Great Hall.

He burst through the double doors, and the book still had not gone. So far, so good. The only person at the staff table yet was Dumbledore, but for once Tom did not care. "Professor!" he cried desperately. Dumbledore looked up from his hash browns and fixed Tom in that penetrating stare he knew too well. "Professor, I just received this note and this book in a parcel!" He placed the book and note before his teacher.

To his shock, Dumbledore smiled. "Ah, yes... I see you are interested in Herbology?" Tom stared at Professor Dumbledore, wondering if he had gone mad. The book was clearly not an Herbology book. "And the note is from your friend Larkin, telling you to have a nice holiday. Why are you so worked up over this, Mr. Riddle?"

"No, Professor, it's a Dark Arts book! See the cover?" Dumbledore looked down, but all he could see was a blue-covered book about advanced Herbology and a short message in Larkin Mallory's sloppy handwriting. It was Professor Dumbledore's turn to look at Tom as though he had gone mad. Tom told Dumbledore everything, including how the note had warned him that this would happen if he told, and the rather sympathetic half-smile left Dumbledore's face as quickly as it had come. Grimly, Dumbledore took out his wand and held it to the two articles.

"Reveal yourselves," he commanded. The blue book turned black, and the crisp parchment note went all wrinkly. He flipped through the book and read the note, and what was left of the twinkle vanished from his eyes. He swore softly and looked up at Tom, still in his dark blue dressing gown and looking very apprehensive. "Tom, I... where did you... who..." Dumbledore could not seem to find the right words. "Tom, listen to me. This is very important. If you ever get another anonymous parcel, bring it straight to me. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Professor Dumbledore, still staring at the articles, swept out, leaving Tom alone in the Great Hall.

10. Prophecies

The rest of the Christmas holidays were passed in the library. Tom knew that the anonymous note had something to do with the message in the common room, for the note had told him that the Dark Arts book had the answer. First thing, Tom researched the Opticus Charm, a charm which allowed one to make something look like something else to a certain person or group of people. He thought it had been silly of the sender to use such a simple charm, for any wizard who suspected it could use a Revealing Charm. Whoever had sent the parcel must not be very bright, he deduced, otherwise he or she did not really care if anyone saw it.

Once he was done with this, Tom moved back to his old habit of shuffling through books and looking for the words "circle" and "games." The letter, at least, had given him a hint. It was bound to be in something about Defense Against the Dark Arts. Or so he thought. After countless hours of reading, Tom could not find anything pertinent in any of the books he tried. He had taken to carrying around the dust jackets of his textbooks to hide the books he was really reading, so that if Professor Dumbledore saw him, he would just see that Tom was reading a Transfiguration book and ignore it.

Classes started up again, and, as Professor Xavier had promised, they researched grindylows right at the beginning. Tom began taking Transfiguration with Matthew's class, and he was pleased to see that though he remained the best in the class, he had to work to maintain this. Charms got gradually better as the Hufflepuffs got used to the Slytherins, and History of Magic, as usual, was fun. Even Herbology was tolerable. Tom started working with Lili whenever he had the chance, and he found that he actually worked better when she was there. After one more discussion, it did not take Tom long to figure out that Lili had been the one to send him the note the night he found out that Hannah died. He never mentioned it, however, because thinking about Hannah was still agonizing.

At the beginning of the Easter holidays, Tom signed up to stay at Hogwarts once more. The teachers had all given them a pile of homework, but Tom did it all in the first night so that he would have his own time during the rest of the holiday. More people chose to stay at Hogwarts, but Francis and Richard both went home. On the down side, so did Lili. Tom thought that perhaps this was a blessing in disguise. He would have more time to spend in the library without having to worry about his friend feeling neglected.

By the third day of the holidays, Tom realized it was no use. He had gone through the entire Defense Against the Dark Arts section of the library, but he still could not find what he was looking for. His only hope was to try out the Restricted Section. At first, Tom considered asking Professor Chapman for a permission form. He dismissed this idea quickly, for Chapman and Dumbledore were very close friends, and the Slytherin Head of House would probably tell Professor Dumbledore if Tom asked him. This left Tom with only one option: to enter the library at night. The Restricted Section was rather small, so Tom would only need about two nights to go through all the necessary books. The trick was getting in and not getting caught.

Tom chose the night before Easter to pay his first visit to the library. There would be an Easter's Eve feast, and after feasts, people usually fell asleep right away, exhausted by the meal. The chances that someone else would be prowling the school at night were very slim. Tom chose Easter night for his second endeavor for precisely the same reason. It seemed like the perfect plan. He could stay up all night searching until he found the right answer.

On the morning of Easter's Eve, Tom went down to breakfast to find a large screech owl waiting for him. There was a large parcel tied to its legs. Tom sat down and relieved the owl of its

burden. It squawked appreciatively and fluttered out the window. At first, Tom was worried that it was another anonymous package, but he recognized Lili's handwriting on the envelope. The letter read as follows.

Tom--

I heard you talking about doing some research in the Restricted Section. This might help you not get caught. Don't do anything stupid, and have a good holiday.

Yours,

Lili Xeng Po

Intrigued, Tom pulled off the paper and looked inside the box. He saw a sliver of shimmering fabric in the light coming from the ceiling, and his heart leapt. If this was what he thought it was... Tom quickly shut the box as he heard Dumbledore coming toward him. He stuffed the letter in his pocket.

"Is this another one?" Professor Dumbledore asked. He looked uncharacteristically anxious.

"No, it's from Lili."

The professor sighed with relief, and Tom thought he saw his mustache twitch slightly. "All right," he said, his eyebrows raised. Philip Cedric snorted into his porridge.

It took Tom a few seconds to understand why they were amused, and when he did, his ears turned bright pink. "She's NOT my girlfriend!" he said truthfully. He had never even considered Lili in that way.

"Yeah. Okay," said Philip skeptically. His face suddenly went serious. "You stay away from her," he added. "She's a pure-blood, she doesn't need to mix with Mudbloods."

"Mr. Cedric, that will be twenty points from Gryffindor," Dumbledore replied immediately, his eyes flashing. "I will not tolerate that kind of language in this school." Tom considered thanking him, but decided against it. He finished his breakfast and headed back up to the dormitory, his parcel in tow. He heard Philip cat-calling behind him, and smiled as Dumbledore took another five points from Gryffindor.

Tom brushed past Daphne Gatefield as he hurried up to his room, eager to see if Lili had truly sent him what he thought she had. He opened the box once more, and a silvery cloak fell onto his bedspread. He allowed himself a grin, and he threw the cape around his shoulders, taking off his pointed hat and flipping the hood over his head. Tom stepped in front of the wheezy old mirror, and though he knew very well that he was there, he could see nothing at all.

"Lili, you've outdone yourself," he murmured, the Invisibility Cloak swishing around him. "This could be *exactly* what I've been looking for."

Tom crept along the corridors in his stocking-feet, shivering. The hallway was drafty, and though the cloak he was wearing was well and good for keeping one from being seen, it was so thin it was useless for warmth. He held a candle in his hands, ready to extinguish it if someone came out of a classroom. Most of the Slytherins were completely wiped out from the feast, and had fallen

asleep already. It was midnight, Tom's favorite hour, and to his further delight, a thunderstorm seemed to be brewing. He heard rain lashing on the roof in torrents, and distant thunder rolled through the clouds to his ears.

Finally reaching the library, Tom took out his wand. "*Alhomora*," he whispered, and the door creaked open. Closing it and locking it, Tom quickly performed a clever charm that would set off an alarm only he could hear if anyone was approaching the library. With that finished, Tom looked around. The Hogwarts library was easily larger than any other library Tom had ever seen, with hundreds of bookshelves under a vaulted cedar ceiling that Tom liked very much. Tom's sharp eyes quickly picked out the shelf known as the Restricted Section. It was not particularly large, and he could eliminate the Potions half of it automatically.

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," Tom said, and his candle flew up so that it hovered in the middle of the aisle. He glared at it, and it suddenly burned far brighter. That done with, Tom climbed the ladder up to the top shelves, the cloak still concealing him from the outside world. He wrinkled his nose at some of the books. One of them appeared to be splattered with blood ("The Bloody Baron's blood?" Tom wondered vaguely), while another looked horribly like it was made of human skin. At a glance, Tom knew exactly why this section was restricted. Oh well, he thought, he was only here for one thing.

He seized a volume at random, sat down on one of the rungs of the ladder, and read the index carefully. Nothing. He went for the next dusty manuscript, but there was nothing there, either. He kept checking his watch. At two o'clock in the morning, he had still found nothing, though he had gone through nearly a quarter of the books he needed to. At four o'clock, he was starting to grow frustrated. Furiously, he grabbed a book from the shelf. *The Circle of Darkness: A Study of Black Magic*. When Tom realized what he had found, he was thrilled. Could this be it? He tucked it into his dressing-gown pocket under the Invisibility Cloak, extinguished and disposed of his candle, and hurried back to the common room.

It was a quarter past four. Tom remembered that he sometimes woke up this early, but he did not care. Making sure his drapes were tightly closed, Tom took out his wand. "*Pyrio Frigido*," he said, and a small ball of cool blue fire blossomed out of the end of his wand and hovered over his pillow, lighting his reading area. He had purple bags under his eyes from lack of sleep, but all that mattered to him now was finding out what that message in the common room had meant. Fervently, he flipped to the very back, skimmed the index, and found the right page. His heart was going like mad.

The Circle of Darkness (c.f. Circle of Light, pg. 203) is the name of a ring of Dark witches and wizards. In 1220, the first Dark wizard to cause significant damage to the wizarding community set up a prophecy. He said that there would be many great Dark wizards in the future. He warned the wizarding world that from 1220 on, there would be twelve Dark witches and wizards whose powers exceeded those of all the others in their generation combined. This list of witches and wizards includes the prophesier himself, the Dark wizard Amelbius. The prophecy went on to say that the last addition to the Circle would be the greatest, with powers beyond any the world had yet seen. Grindelwald, the current greatest Dark wizard, claims to be the eleventh member of the Circle, and that the last and greatest member will be soon in his or her coming.

Even the bags under Tom's eyes paled. He had heard an awful lot about Grindelwald at Hogwarts, and from the sound of it, he was a dangerous madman who killed women and children for fun. If the world was in for someone ten times worse... He shuddered at the thought.

So, he mused, it had probably been Grindelwald to send up the message in the common room. It was understandable that the Dark wizard would want to tell the world if the Circle were indeed

complete. Being the sick man he was, he probably thought it was reason to celebrate. "It must be rather like the second coming to those people," Tom thought. Tom had a sudden, strange vision of Francis Malfoy and his parents wearing party hats and dancing around like maniacs, but he did not have time to laugh at this.

If the message had had to do with the Circle of Darkness, then whoever had sent Tom the package at Christmas wanted him to know about it. A Dark wizard, most likely, possibly even Grindelwald himself. Whoever it was, one question remained. Why him? Why would he want Tom, of all people, to learn about the Circle of Darkness? A sudden thought hit him, and he felt very ill. Perhaps the sender had been trying to snare him into reading the book, the whole thing and not just the part about the Circle. The Dark side was trying to get him as a follower.

Hoping for some clarification, Tom turned to page two hundred three to read about the Circle of Light.

The Circle of Light was set up as a defense by the wizarding world when Amelbius created the Circle of Darkness. The Circle of Light will also eventually consist of twelve people. There are only ten people on the list now. The Circle of Light consists of the witches and wizards who brought downfall to the members of the Circle of Darkness in their generations. Like a member of the Circle of Darkness, a member of the Circle of Light will be exceptional at all forms of magic, particularly transfiguration and dueling, and will be very intelligent. It is the duty of the Dark wizard community to try to detect future members of the Circle of Light and trick them into practicing the Dark Arts, so as to ensure that the individual will not attempt the downfall of the current Circle of Darkness member.

"Mother of God," Tom whispered. "Nepenthe, could you come here for a moment?"

The silver cobra slithered around the bedpost and scrambled inside. "Yesss, Massster?" he asked.

"Nepenthe--remind me--am I 'exceptional at all forms of magic, particularly transfiguration and dueling'?"

Nepenthe laughed his snake laugh. "Of coursssse you are, Massster."

"But--I'm not 'very intelligent', am I?"

"Yesss, you are."

Tom's face was stricken, his eyes wide, his hands quaking. "Nepenthe...do you think it's possible that I could be a member of the Circle of Light?"

At five-thirty in the morning, Tom returned the book to the library and managed to grab three hours of sleep. He went down to breakfast positively exhausted, and he was so tired that at first he even managed to ignore Philip, who was calling him names under his breath all through the meal. Professor Dumbledore was slightly harder to ignore. He kept shooting Tom suspicious looks, as though he knew that Tom had finally interpreted the message.

"How late were you up last night?" he asked sharply, watching Tom yawn for the umpteenth time.

"Wha...? Oh, right. I couldn't sleep." Tom yawned again and set to work on his egg. Professor Dumbledore nodded and left the room, having finished his breakfast last of all the teachers.

"Pun," Philip asked, "I have to ask you something. Why is it that you almost always eat like a horse?" He sniggered. "Do they starve you at home or something?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Tom replied softly, his eyes flaming. "The smallest meal I get at Hogwarts is larger than a whole week's worth of food back at home."

Something flickered across Philip's face. Was it pity? Whatever it was, it vanished quickly. "No wonder you're so thin," he sneered. "Your mother and father must really hate you to treat you like that."

There was a loud bang. Tom had slammed his goblet down on the table. Furiously, he leapt to his feet, pulling out his wand. There was definitely something amiss in his eyes. They were shining so brightly they looked almost red instead of turquoise. He saw his peers shrink back at the sight of him, terrified that they might get in the way. "Don't you *dare* insult my Mum," he whispered, eyes looking redder than ever. "Go ahead and insult me all you want, but never--NEVER--insult my Mum."

Philip laughed. "You must have a serious Oedipus Complex or something," he remarked. "Well, if your mother's so great, why does she starve you?"

"She's dead, you imbecile!" Tom roared. "Dead! And my idiot Muggle father is to blame for it, so I would prefer if you did not mention him, either!" There was no question about the redness in his eyes now. Every trace of blue-green had vanished. Philip looked scared out of his wits, image forgotten. "If you ever insult her again, I'll--" Tom stopped, aghast. His wand had emitted a jet of yellow sparks without his asking it to, and the sparks had hit Philip in the chest. He doubled up, gasping for air, his hands on his throat. The redness in Tom's eyes flickered and died, replaced by pure horror.

"What's going on here?" a raspy voice demanded. Tom spun around to see Headmaster Dippet, who had just arrived late for breakfast.

The Gryffindors immediately pointed at Tom, gabbling and accusing. The Hufflepuffs were watching, transfixed with shock, and the Ravenclaws were all trying out various counter-curses on the blond boy. The Slytherins were too repulsed to be amused by their enemy's fate. Dippet tapped his wand on Philip's neck, and the Gryffindor was finally able to breathe, taking deep, shuddering breaths and sobbing.

"What happened, Mr. Riddle?" Dippet asked.

Tom explained truthfully, and Dippet nodded. "So you never actually said the curse?" he asked.

"No," Tom replied. "I don't even know which curse that is."

"Hmm. Well, for your information, Mr. Riddle, that curse is called the Pertussis Curse, and it is considered Dark magic by Ministry law." Tom blanched, his jaw dropping. "Let's see... for a provoked and apparently accidental attack on another student, let's make it twenty-five points from Slytherin and a detention. Mr. Cedric, for provoking him, fifteen points from Gryffindor and a detention. You will receive slips for your detentions tomorrow at breakfast." Dippet sat down heavily and started on his already cold meal. Tom and Philip exchanged hostile looks, and the former stormed out of the room, his heart beating rapidly.

How had he been able to perform Dark magic when he had never learned it? Tom had certainly never heard of the Pertussis Curse, and he had not considered performing anything life-threatening on Philip. Nonetheless, there was something horrible about the idea of being able to perform Dark magic...something horrible but strangely satisfying. The crueler half of Tom's brain thought how easy it would be to get back at enemies with Dark magic. Tom squashed the thought immediately, furious with himself.

"Think of it logically," the familiar, nasty voice said. "Dark magic has everything. You gain the respect of your peers, you get back at the people you want to. You could be so powerful that the world would be at your beck and call."

"Shut up!" Tom thought, hands balling up into fists. "Just shut up!" This was just perfect. If he really was a member of the Circle of Light, the Circle of Darkness would want to turn him to the Dark side, to stop him from opposing them. He would be making their job a lot easier if he started up with Dark magic on his own. Yet, if he kept performing curses he had never heard of, what choice did he have?

"Think of Philip and Francis," the nasty voice continued. "Think of your father."

Tom stopped dead in his tracks.

"Wouldn't you like to try out a little Dark magic on that two-timing Muggle scumbag?" the voice said slyly. "You yourself once thought that the Cruciatus Curse might have a purifying effect on him... why not try something a little more *lethal*? Something a little *darker*?"

For half a second, Tom thought he saw a little reason in what the voice was saying. Then he realized what was going on in his brain, and he put all his energy into shoving the ideas to the back of his mind. "You're wrong," he said softly, rushing through the corridors to the common room. "You're wrong."

Tom was running top-speed through a forest. It might have been the Forbidden Forest; Tom would not know, having never been in there before. All he could think about was getting away. From what, Tom was unaware. He heard his robes whipping around behind him, and his hat had long since been knocked off his head. Again, his hand was clenched around his wand.

Not noticing where he was going, Tom collided with something tall and cold. He looked up and saw the mirror standing before him, the mirror he had been dreaming about for several months. His reflection was, as usual, pale and terrified-looking, though his robes looked like some finer fabric, silk, probably. It took only an instant for the reflection to transform this time.

"Tom," the reflection said in its high-pitched voice. There was a demented smile on the face of the specter. "Come and see... come and see what I have done."

"What?"

The specter held out a white hand and grabbed Tom around the wrist, diving back into the mirror. Tom broke its grasp just as he was starting to go into the mirror, and he ran as quickly as he could in the opposite direction, though his feet seemed to be made of lead.

"Massster?" Tom felt something tickle his face, and he woke up looking into Nepenthe's golden eyes. "Massster, are you all right? You cried out in your sssleep."

"Nepenthe... the dream... I had the dream again..."

"All is well, Massster. Go back to sssleep."

"All right, Nepenthe." Tom dropped off almost immediately. Nepenthe continued to stare at his Master, quite worried. It was a very long time before the loyal pet slithered off the bed and into the shadows.

11. Away from Hogwarts and Back Again

Tom sat in the Great Hall, watching Professor Dippet. It was the thirtieth of June and the last day of school, and Tom was thoroughly depressed. He had grown so used to Hogwarts that leaving it seemed to be an impossibility, and whenever someone mentioned summer break, it made a lump rise in his throat. Tom had written home and had asked the new housekeeper, Miss Olga Dench, to meet him at King's Cross on the first of July, so getting back to the orphanage should be no difficulty. Being there would be the problem.

He compulsively smoothed his robes and straightened his hat as Dippet droned on with the end-of-year speech. The Slytherins had won the Inter-House Championship as well as the Quidditch Cup, which made the Gryffindors in particular extremely sulky. Tom pinched himself hard on the arm to keep from nodding off, but the others were not making the effort. The air in the Great Hall was humid and fuggy, a very soporific combination that was enhanced by the boring nature of the speech.

The last few months had been rather uneventful on the outside, but all the while, Tom had been haunted by those awful thoughts. They would go dormant for a while, then pop up again, ambushing him on his way to class, or while he was eating. The dreams involving the specter were growing more and more frequent, until Tom rarely went three days without having at least one. Whenever he took out the Invisibility Cloak to go explore the school, he felt a nagging, tugging temptation to dash up to the library and read everything about how to practice Dark magic. For a few awful weeks, he thought he was going mad.

"And now," recited Headmaster Dippet, clearing his throat, "may I present to you the top exam scorers for each year, starting at year one. From Gryffindor, I give you Philip Cedric and Ambika Dawes!" The Gryffindor table cheered and clapped raucously. Tom tensed up slightly and forced a few terse claps.

"From Hufflepuff, Robert Aberson and Abigail Forrey!" Tom watched Robert and Abby hurry up to the staff table to stand behind the teachers. Abby looked ecstatic, and she beamed around at everyone. Her face drooped slightly when she glanced over at the Slytherin table. Both of the Hufflepuffs were Muggle-born, and almost none of the Slytherins were even politely applauding.

"From Ravenclaw, Ralph Hiarro and Lili Po." Tom clapped for his friend, and she grinned at him as she accepted her certificate.

"And finally, from Slytherin, Tom Riddle and Serena Birch!" Tom met Serena's eye and smiled slightly as they rose from the table and crossed over to stand with the other Honor Roll students. Serena had wispy shoulder-length hair the same color as Ambika's, but her eyes were warm brown, which contrasted sharply with her moon-pale features. Tom did not know her as well as some of the other Slytherins, but she was always friendly--that is, except with Richard Zabini, who she seemed to detest.

"Congratulations," Dumbledore said to them, handing them their certificates.

"The very highest scorer for the first year was Tom Riddle," Dippet said, "passing each exam with an average of two hundred percent, the highest on the record."

There was uproarious cheering at the Slytherin table with a little polite clapping from the Hufflepuffs, though the Ravenclaws showed slightly more enthusiasm. The Gryffindors only glared, clearly furious that a Slytherin could make top grades. Tom shot them a sarcastic smile,

which they ignored. After being given their papers, the Honor Roll students trudged back to their seats. Tom sighed with relief. His part was over.

As Dippet read off the Honor Rolls for the second- to seventh-years, Tom allowed his mind to wander. He imagined the welcome he would receive back at the orphanage when he returned from what they thought was Smeltings. He hoped that Gregory was still afraid of him, and that he could avoid Mr. Carney for two months. Tom wondered what Miss Dench looked like. Somehow, she called to mind a hook-nosed old bat with spectacles, a jowly face, and steel-grey hair drawn back in a tight bun, the sort of woman who would scold twelve-year-old boys for not joining the Army to fight the Nazis.

When the end-of-year ceremony and feast were over, Tom and his friends headed back to the common room. "I'll send you an owl every day," Larkin promised. "You had better write me back, or I'll send you an envelope of bubotuber pus."

"Quincunx," Zuhayr said to the wood nymph, and the cluster of Slytherins filed into the common room. Tom looked around at it all, thinking how horribly he would miss it during his absence.

The same fourth-year students who always borrowed food burst in, carrying cakes, cookies, pies, and bottles of butterbeer. This time, Tom wanted to be involved with the party. He wanted to spend time with his friends, for right now he felt like if he did not capture the moment, he would never see them again. Every four seconds, someone shoved a yearbook and quill under his nose, asking him to sign it. He had no idea where his own was; it was travelling around the room, most likely. At midnight, everyone sent up sparks and bubbles from their wands, located their yearbooks, and meandered up to bed. Tom felt very strange, like there was something stuck in his throat. He collapsed into his four-poster, staring up into the canopy and thinking how little he wanted to leave.

Miss Olga Dench wrinkled her nose. Children, all over the place, laughing, playing. Miss Dench absolutely abhorred children of all shapes and sizes, and she wondered how she had got stuck picking two of them up at the train station.

Suddenly, she spotted them. Mr. Carney had given her very accurate descriptions; at least, they were very accurate in her opinion. He had said the girl was fat, with ratty red hair and too many freckles, and that the boy was skeletal and dark-haired with a mean look about him. As she saw them, she thought that Mr. Carney had been quite right.

At the same time, Tom looked over the heads of all of the other people and saw a severe-looking woman standing near the entrance. Seeing her, he thought that his idea of her appearance was more than correct. "That'll be Miss Dench," he said to Abby, who had been purposefully avoiding his eyes. The two of them were wearing their orphanage uniforms. Abby wore a pleated grey skirt, a white blouse, and a grey jacket, while Tom wore a grey jacket, white shirt, and grey slacks. Tom could tell Abby was unused to her clothes now that she had spent several months in black robes.

Abby looked at Miss Dench, and her rosy face saddened. "Oh... I liked Hannah so much better." Tom said nothing, not trusting himself to avoid the tears that were tickling the insides of his eyelids.

They slowed down their trolleys as they reached her, and the towering old woman leered down at them. "Good afternoon," Miss Dench snarled. "My name is Olga Dench, though you shall address me as 'ma'am' when you speak to me. Are you Thomas and Abigail?"

Abby started to agree, but Tom cut her off. "My name isn't Thomas," he said. "It's just Tom."

Miss Dench looked most displeased. "I prefer to call people by their Baptized names, Thomas," she barked.

"But my proper name is Tom," Tom cried, exasperated. "My father was Thomas. Mum named me Tom to distinguish between us."

Without warning, Miss Dench slapped him hard across the face, so hard that his head jerked to the side. "You will address me as 'ma'am,'" she snapped. "And I have had enough of your insolence, Thomas."

"That's TOM!" Tom barked. Miss Dench slapped him again, her cold, bony hand landing on the exact same spot. "Ma'am," Tom added spitefully. There was a large red patch on his cheek. Abby shot him a horrified look and seemed about to ask him if he was all right, but she stopped, not wanting the same treatment.

"Get your luggage together," Miss Dench growled. "Ready? Now, both of you follow me."

After a carriage-ride to the orphanage, Tom and Abby tugged their trunks up the stairs. Miss Dench did not aid them, though Abby's trunk fell down the steps several times. Mr. Carney was not in sight. Apparently, he was off at the pub as usual. Once sure Abby had got her things up all right, Tom seized his baggage and stormed up the stairs to his bedroom. He hid his trunk under the bunk bed, along with Nepenthe's cage. Catching his reflection in the mirror, Tom felt incredibly dejected. He looked like the Tom the Muggle world knew; unkempt, bruised, and slightly manic-depressive.

Within a few minutes, Gregory Hamill burst in, chatting with Bartholomew Werner. A grin spread across his face. "So, Tommy Salami, you finally got back from Smeltings."

"Yes," he replied coldly.

"I hear they stuff people's heads down the toilet at Smeltings," Gregory smirked. "Is it true? Betcha they did it to you, didn't they?"

Tom shrugged, determined not to provoke an attack.

"Still haven't learned to talk, though, have you?" Gregory got that cruel glint in his eye. "I'd've thought Smeltings would knock some brains into you. Of course, you are a rather hopeless case in that department."

Tom's left hand automatically moved toward his belt, but his wand was locked in his trunk. "Watch out, Gregory," he murmured. "You never know, I might set a snake on you again." His eyes flamed, and a smile played at the corners of his mouth as he saw Gregory's face fall. "For all you know," he continued, the smile growing wider, "I could call one up here, and then where would you be?"

Gregory went pale. "C'mon, Bart," he said, ushering his friend out of the room. Tom collapsed onto the bed, staring at the familiar blue canvas of the mattress above. At least he had Gregory out of the way for the moment, but as things were going, this was going to be a long, horrible summer.

Unfortunately, Tom's divination skills were dead center. Mr. Carney was getting worse and worse, drinking more often and in larger quantities than ever before. One day he beat Tom for no reason except that he was bored. Gregory usually kept out of his way, but if he had enough of his friends around him, he sometimes got brave enough to try something. In addition, Miss Dench seemed to truly detest him, and he had to stay out of her way as well. For all these reasons, Tom started to spend all of his time locked up in his room, pacing, chatting with Nepenthe, and rereading his school textbooks for the thousandth time. He was not allowed to use magic at home because he lived among Muggles, so even that was out of the question. By mid-July, Tom was bored out of his mind.

On the twenty-second, his Hogwarts supply list came, which offered some sanctuary. He pocketed his wand and the list and sneaked away directly after lunch, eager to consort with wizards again. It was a long walk to the Leaky Cauldron, but Tom did not care. When he finally did arrive, he was greeted warmly by George, the bartender.

"Tom! Nice to see you again," he said. "Would you like a soda or something?"

Seeing as Tom was glad to be back and was not looking forward to going back to the orphanage, he agreed, taking a seat near a little old witch with bright purple robes. He sipped his soda and listened to the gossip, feeling at home for the first time in weeks. After a few minutes, he heard something that made his heart skip a beat or two.

"They say Grindelwald's getting more powerful in the U.S.S.R. Gaining all sorts of supporters," a wise-looking witch was saying. "If he really is one of those Dark Circle folks, I'd say we're in for trouble."

"Ar," agreed her companion. "Bloody 'Ell, 'e's already killed 'round a thousand of our kind, an' God knows 'ow many Muggles. Dunno 'ow anyone's goin' ter stop 'im."

"You know what I've heard," the witch said grimly, "he's been working with that awful Hitler man, teaching him a few... tricks of the trade..." Her friend gasped. "Grindelwald gave him a few--er, *devices* that'll make his job a lot easier. All he wants in return is immunity for himself and his followers."

"Barking mad," the warlock replied. "The both of 'em, two-timin' backstabbers. I thought old Grinsey didn't want ter associate 'imself wit' Muggles."

"He doesn't seem to care anymore. Grindelwald's up to something, I can tell. He's been all over the Daily Prophet lately, and not just for that, no. Killings are getting more frequent, more gruesome. Seems to me he's plotting something huge." Tom listened intently, waiting for her to elaborate, but she never did. Realizing he was done with his soda, he paid for the drink and strode out the back door.

Tom returned to the Leaky Cauldron an hour later, laden with books (including his usual twenty for extra credit), the newly required dress robes, and new potion ingredients. The witch and warlock who had been discussing Grindelwald had gone, so he saw no reason in remaining there. As he walked home, he went over the conversation in his head. The witch was right; if Grindelwald was a member of the Circle of Darkness, someone had to stop him before he got too powerful. "Me," Tom thought miserably. "If I am what I think I am, the person to stop him will have to be me." He shuddered, thinking that anybody who had killed thousands of people would be nearly impossible to defeat.

As he reached the orphanage, Tom was suddenly hit by a horrible feeling. Something--he was not sure what--was telling him that there was something amiss. He climbed the stairs, feeling increasingly uneasy. Where was everybody? Usually, at this time of day, the children would be scampering around on the front lawn, playing and chatting. The front garden was completely deserted.

Tom placed his hand on the chilly brass doorknob and twisted it slowly, still looking over his shoulder and wondering where everyone had gone. When the door opened, Tom found himself face-to-face with Miss Dench, and she was in a rage. "Where the hell have you been?" she demanded, breathing very hard through her overlarge nostrils.

"I had to buy some textbooks for Smeltings," Tom half-lied, indicating his bags.

"Why didn't you tell us you were leaving?" she snarled. "You had us all thinking you were lost or kidnapped. You have been wasting the time of all the other orphans, keeping them cooped up inside for repetitive head counts and other such things. Abigail Forrey, God knows why, is in tears."

"Sorry. Well, I had better go," Tom said hurriedly, pushing past and making for the staircase. Miss Dench seized him by the shirt collar and grabbed the parcels from his hands.

"Let's just see what you really bought," she snapped. "Follow me into the sitting room, Thomas."

"My name's Tom," Tom said, but for once Miss Dench did not care. She dragged him into the sitting room, slamming the door behind them.

There was a horrible look on her face. "I know you would tell us if you went to get Smeltings supplies," she said, baring her pointy teeth. "Let's see... you've probably been wasting your allowance on frivolous little trinkets..." She reached into one of the bags and pulled out a spellbook. Tom bit his lip and tried to look innocent. "Witchcraft?" she asked incredulously. "Is this some sort of joke?" As she flipped through the book, Miss Dench came across a moving photograph, and her face drained of color. She forced an awful smile that made Tom flinch. "I suppose you also have a magic wand and a broomstick?" she growled.

Tom forced himself to stay calm. "No broomstick," he said in a would-be casual voice. "They're really expensive, I can't afford one."

Miss Dench ran her tongue over her vampire-like teeth. "So... you're a witch?"

"A witch has to be a girl," Tom responded coolly. "I'm a wizard."

"Whatever you want to call yourself, Thomas, the truth remains that you are a--a user of magic." The grimace on Miss Dench's face made Tom want to turn on his heel and run, but he stood his ground. "Do you realize that this fact alone could get you thrown out of this orphanage?"

Tom thought fast. Whipping his wand out of his pocket, he pointed it at Miss Dench, smiling sarcastically. "And do *you* realize, Miss Dench, that if you try to tell Mr. Carney, I could turn you into a salamander? Do you realize that if you ever tell anybody, I can--and will--use a powerful and painful curse on you?" The old woman saw what Tom could not: that his eyes had once more shifted hues. She took a few steps back, the bundles falling from her hands.

"Thomas, your--your eyes--" For the first time in her formidable existence, Miss Dench felt truly afraid.

"And for the last time, Miss Dench, my proper name is Tom. Tom Marvolo Riddle. Remember that. Not Thomas. Tom."

The old Muggle nodded slightly, her eyes still on his. The red in his eyes faded, and he put his wand away, still eyeing Miss Dench with utmost hatred. "If you ever tell Mr. Carney, you'll know the full extent of my anger. Good day to you." Tom gathered up his packages and stalked out of the room, leaving Miss Dench staring at the spot where he had been standing.

Tom's summer grew slightly better after this. He had new reading material, and Miss Dench was being somewhat civil. However, Tom found a new problem with Abby Forrey. Abby, for some strange reason, had changed her mind about him. She seemed to have decided that not all Slytherins were evil, after all, and she had taken to following him around and chatting. Tom was not particularly fond of Abby. Miss Dench had made him feel even more strongly that Muggles were all horrible, and Tom thought that Abby, being a Muggle-born, had to be the same. For their entire first year, she had been just as prejudiced and snarly as any Muggle. Her change of heart had done nothing to change Tom's opinion of her.

On the first of September, it was not Miss Dench to wake him, but Abby. She had her ginger-colored hair in a bun on the back of her head and was already dressed. It took Tom a few seconds to recognize her. "Abby--what are you doing in here?! You're not allowed... what time is it?"

"Five-fifteen," Abby replied casually. "Ready to go?"

"Five-fifteen?" Tom echoed. "Abby, honestly! Don't you sleep?"

"I don't see how I could," Abby squealed. "I was up all night, packing. Are you all packed?"

"Yes, but Abby, it's five-fifteen in the morning."

"Five-sixteen," Abby corrected, checking her watch. "I'll leave, and you can get dressed. I already sent a letter to the Ministry, and they're sending a car again." Tom thought this was surprisingly logical of her, for that idea had never occurred to him. "Is that okay with you?"

"Can't I get a few more hour's sleep, Abby? We don't have to be there until eleven o'clock."

"I thought we'd get out of here before the Muggles wake up," Abby replied. "Now, get up and get dressed, and I'll get my own stuff downstairs and get some breakfast. All right?"

Seeing as Tom was too tired to disagree, he nodded slowly and sat up. Abby smiled broadly and dashed off, leaving Tom to get ready on his own. He looked up at Gregory, who was fast asleep in one of the bunks. What a pity that he could not give him even a tiny curse. He took his wand out of his trunk and put it in his coat pocket, just in case. Nepenthe slithered out of his basket and looked up at Tom. "Is it the firsssssst of Sssseptember?" he asked groggily.

"Mmm hmm," the boy replied absently, snapping his trunk closed. "Just a little more time in the basket, Nepenthe, and then I'll let you out on the train."

"All right," Nepenthe agreed reluctantly. He had been trapped in his basket for nearly the whole summer, and he needed to stretch his coils. Tom picked up his trunk and his pet's basket and crept out of the room with catlike silence and agility.

Abby was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, practically jumping with anticipation. Her toad, Bogus, actually was jumping, all around his tank. As he reached the bottom, Abby handed Tom a plateful of eggs, toast, and bacon. "Here you go. Hurry up, I've already eaten mine and the car will turn up as soon as they know we're ready."

"You really hate this place, don't you?"

"Of course," Abby responded, shuddering. "Don't you?"

Tom took a long time to answer. "I think it's beyond hate with me," he sighed, swallowing a mouthful of bacon. "Well, I'm done," he added, not feeling very hungry. "Let's go out and wait for the car." It was not as rainy as it had been last year, but it was drizzly and, as usual, foggy. The Ministry car turned up after only a few seconds, and before Tom knew it, they had arrived at King's Cross Station. Tom let Abby pass through the barrier first, then followed her, trolley in tow.

As he stepped over the threshold, the wind was knocked out of him by something that collided with him. Whatever it was, its head had hit him in the lower chest, and it had pulled him into such a tight hug that he wondered if any blood was getting to his legs. The top of the head was covered with dark hair, which fell in silky pigtails down the person's back.

"Lili? What the--geroff, will you?" Lili hugged him still tighter, beaming up at him.

"Oh, Tom, I missed you so much!" she cried, her face rosy.

"Yeah--me too--you're cutting off my circulation." Lili finally broke away, and Tom sighed with relief.

"Oh dear... you've grown a lot taller! You must be at least five-six by now."

"Probably," Tom replied awkwardly. He saw Abby and Lucy several yards away. Both of them were glaring at Lili mutinously. "How've you been?"

"Wretched," Lili replied. "None of my school friends could visit." She hesitated, still grinning. "Come on, I already got us a compartment."

"Um... okay..." Tom followed his friend up to the train, still rubbing his chest where she had rammed into it. Nepenthe could tell that he could be let out soon, for he was chattering enthusiastically.

When they reached the compartment, Tom promptly let his pet out of the basket. Lili flinched, for she was not fond of snakes, but Nepenthe behaved very well, so she did not object. About ten minutes later, Adrian, Zuhayr, and Larkin turned up and took the remaining seats in the compartment. None of them seemed to mind the Ravenclaw in their midst, and the two girls had become good friends by the time the train started.

The lady with the lunch cart turned up at noon, and the party had a brilliant time with their Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. As usual, Tom was unlucky with the bean flavors. He always had been. By the end of his bag, he had tasted rusty nails, glass, rubber, bee entrails, cricket antennae, opium poppies, cyanide, blood, bubotuber pus, pelican feathers, alligator sweat, and cow tongue, among other things. Tired of his rotten luck, he turned to Lili and asked for one of her beans, for she had had wonderful flavors all through her bag. The bean she gave him turned out to be the only bad bean in her bag, one flavored to taste like burnt spinach.

At six o'clock, the train halted, and the friends left the train, taking horseless carriages up to the school. Tom watched the Sorting with interest and greeted all of the new Slytherins warmly. One of them turned out to be Serena Birch's little sister, Mandy, who looked just like her sister except her eyes were green instead of brown.

After the feast, the Slytherins made their way up to their tower, and Tom listened idly as a prefect announced the password ("antediluvian"). As he looked around the cozy common room, his mind filled with joyful thoughts and memories. The same troublemaking students, now fifth-years, produced several bags of marshmallows and passed them around for everyone to toast over the fire. Richard Zabini tried to sneak a few extras, but the bag, being enchanted, bit him very hard, and he shrieked like a girl, trying to shake it off. The Slytherins roared with laughter at the sight of him, hopping around the room with an angry marshmallow bag clamped around his wrist.

As Tom looked around at all the faces, most of which belonged to his friends, he felt like he was finally home.

12. Grindelwald and Games

The next month went by so quickly that Tom barely knew where the time had gone. He still maintained his excellent grades, and he quickly made friends with all of the Slytherin first-years. The ghosts were kind, as always, and the classes were getting more interesting. Transfiguration, in particular, was growing to be a weekly fascination. Tom and the seventh-years were studying very difficult transformations now, and though Tom always managed to do the assignments, they were getting steadily harder. Professor Dumbledore was teaching them conjuring, now, and he said that by December they would be getting into the transformation of other humans. He mentioned something about *Animagi*, or wizards who could turn into animals at will. Professor Dumbledore then demonstrated by turning into a bumblebee and zooming around the room. Tom was intrigued, and he thought that he might be interested in turning into an animal himself.

Another thing Tom found enjoyable was that second- through seventh-years were allowed to attend optional night classes. Tom signed up for four of them. The first was the Dueling Club, taught by Professor Flitwick. After that, Ghost Studies, taught by Professor Dumbledore. Tom had signed up for the other two classes because his friends forced him. There was Song Magic, which Zuhayr had bullied him into attending after hearing him sing, and the Magical Artist's Guild, because the whole of Slytherin House knew that Tom was a very good artist, and had threatened to pelt him with bubotuber pus if he did not sign up.

As he entered the common room after his very first Magical Arts lesson in late September, he found it in complete silence. Serena and Mandy Birch were sitting on a loveseat, staring at a letter they had received with tears flowing quietly down their faces. The other Slytherins clearly felt awkward, and Larkin was trying to comfort the Birch sisters, but to no avail. Everyone looked up when he entered.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

Serena silently handed him the letter, and the two girls burst into noisy sobs. Tom read the message. His face drained of color and he sank into a nearby chair.

Dear Amanda and Serena Birch,

I regret to inform you that your mother and father, Constance and Trowbridge Birch, have been killed in France. They went after Grindelwald with a group of other Aurors, and the action resulted in their respective deaths. I hope it will somewhat comfort you to know that your parents died in pursuit of a good cause, and they will both receive the Order of Merlin, First Class, for their bravery and loyalty.

You will be placed in the custody of your maternal aunt, Mrs. Meliora Weasley, and her husband, Mr. Blake Weasley. I hope you understand the situation, and I would like to offer my personal sympathies. I understand that this will be very hard for you, but you must understand that your parents died in an attempt to save the lives of others, and they succeeded in preventing the deaths of seventy Beauxbatons pupils. Their deaths were noble ones.

Again, I am very sorry for your loss.

Yours Truly,

Dolan H. Clarence
Minister of Magic

Tom looked up from the letter and handed it back to Mandy. "Mandy, Serena, I am so, so sorry." Mandy nodded silently, tears sliding down her cheeks. Serena ripped the letter into tiny pieces, threw the pieces into the fire, and stomped up to her dormitory, still quaking with sobs. "Look, if there's anything I can do--"

Without warning, Mandy dashed at him, flung her arms around his neck, and began crying into his shoulder. "Thank you," Mandy wept. "Thank you for being so nice!"

"Er--" Not quite sure what to do, Tom patted Mandy on top of the head, grimacing slightly.

"I hate Grindelwald!" Mandy wailed, burying her face into Tom's collarbone. "I just hate him! Why does he have to kill people he doesn't even know?"

"Basket cases are like that," Tom said uncomfortably, trying to pry Mandy's arms off his neck and console her at the same time. It suddenly occurred to him that this was only the second time in his life he had really been hugged. If truth be told, he was not sure he liked it very much. "Don't worry, Mandy, he'll get his someday." Mandy wailed more loudly and hugged him so hard it felt like a headlock.

"Er... Mandy, I'm sure I know how you feel, but I'm in an awful lot of pain right now. Could you--er--" Mandy did not pay him any heed; if anything, the hug tightened considerably. The right shoulder of Tom's robes was starting to feel damp. "Mandy, I--erm, I'm really tired. I have to go to sleep." This was a lie, but Tom would have done anything to get the little girl off of his neck.

Mandy reluctantly broke away. Her nose was very red. "You're so understanding," she sighed, blowing her nose loudly into a handkerchief. "Thanks."

Now Tom had no choice but to go up to the dormitory. He feigned a yawn on his way up, just to make it convincing. When he reached the dormitory, he realized that Francis was following him. "What do you want?" he demanded.

Francis smirked. "Manners, Riddle," he said. "You coming to the Dueling Club meeting tomorrow?"

"Yes," Tom said again. Francis laughed coldly.

"How d'you fancy a duel?" he challenged. "Tomorrow. I'll partner up with you at the Dueling Club, and then we'll see if you're as good as you think you are."

"You know I am," Tom retorted. He was smiling slightly, but his voice was icy. "If you'll remember on the Hogwarts Express on our very first day..." He trailed off, watching Francis frown. "I'll accept your challenge, stupid though it may be."

"You're on, Mudblood," Francis replied. As he turned to go, Tom, furious at being called a Mudblood, took out his wand and shouted a few well-chosen words. His spell lit the dormitory with a blazing golden light, and Francis's legs suddenly gave way. He seemed not to be able to stand up properly. "What did you do to me?" he gasped.

"Jelly-legs," Tom replied casually. "I'm saving the real curses for our duel, though if you stick around, I might change my mind."

Francis stumbled down the stairs, his legs squiggling like worms. Tom allowed himself a laugh at his enemy's demise, and he sat down on his bed. It was only ten o'clock, and Tom usually stayed up far later than this. Feeling bored already, Tom called for Nepenthe. His pet emerged from beneath Richard Zabini's bed. "Hello, Nepenthe," he said, allowing the cobra to coil around his arm.

"What'sssss new?" Nepenthe asked.

"Well, I just had my first art lesson, I have a duel with Francis tomorrow, and Serena and Mandy's parents died."

"Sssssounds like you've been busy."

"I suppose." Tom's face fell. "I'm worried, though. It sounds like Grindelwald's been getting more daring. I mean, he was in Eastern Europe first, wasn't he? Now I think he's in France. D'you think he's up to something?"

"Dark wizards are always up to sssomething." Nepenthe sighed heavily. "Why do you insssst on taking the troubles of the world upon your shoulders?"

"Because," Tom said, "if I'm right about what I am, I might have to deal with that monster. Of course, I could be wrong, but I doubt it. I looked up a few more things about the Circle of Light. A lot of the members of both Circles are descended from very important wizards. I mean, they say that Grindelwald's descended from Amelbius himself, and the last Circle of Light member was one of Merlin's descendants."

"And you are the lasssst living relative of Ssssalazar Sssslytherin," Nepenthe finished. "Wasn't he a Dark wizard?"

Tom's eyes flashed with anger. "No. He studied the Dark Arts, but he did not practice them."

"Oh." Nepenthe looked confused. "Well, it sssseems that you fit all of the criteria for being a member of the Cccircle, but I cannot ssssee you going after Grindelwald."

"Why not?"

Nepenthe laughed. "You are very young, Masssster. Whoever heard of a child defeating a Dark wizard?"

Tom felt mildly offended, but he did not pursue the subject. He and Nepenthe discussed other matters for a while, until Tom finally started to feel sleepy and decided to go to bed. Nepenthe bade him good night and slithered off into the shadows.

"Help me..."

"Who's there?" Tom called. He was walking through a forest, and the fog was thick in front of him. He had his wand lit, but it was not doing much good. The fog was so dense that he could barely see an inch in front of his nose.

"Help me..." the voice repeated. "Don't let him get me... help me..."

"Where are you?" Tom demanded. The fog was getting slightly thinner, and Tom was able to see the dark outlines of the trees around him.

Without warning, footsteps could be heard, coming in his direction. Tom turned to look, terrified that he would see his specter again. However, all he saw was a little boy. The boy had bright green eyes under thick glasses, and his black hair was tousled. Seeing Tom, he flung himself at him, steadyng himself on Tom's arms and gasping for breath. "Help me," the boy repeated. As he looked up, Tom saw that there was a great gash on his forehead, shaped rather like a bolt of lightning.

"What happened to you?" Tom asked, watching blood dribble out of the cut on the boy's forehead.

"He got me," the boy panted, indicating his cut. "Please, make him go away."

"Who?" Tom started to ask, but a tall, thin shape emerged from the trees. The only detail Tom could see of it was gleaming crimson eyes.

"Him," the boy wheezed. Blood was trickling into his eyes.

The specter laughed its cold laugh. "Hmmm... a double killing should not be too hard." It reached for its wand, and the little boy cried out. There was a green flash, the flash Tom had dreamt about for ages...

Tom woke up an instant later, his heart throbbing and his forehead searing. The pain seemed to be concentrated in a lightning bolt-shaped area in the middle of his forehead, directly adjacent to the slash on the head of the little boy. After a few seconds, it died away, but Tom was still left with that shaky, horrible feeling he had after every one of his specter dreams.

Shivering, he rolled over and looked at his alarm clock. It was seven o'clock, a reasonable hour. In fifteen minutes, he finished getting ready for class and trudged down the stairs. Though it was very warm in the castle, he felt strangely cold. When he reached the common room, it was deserted except for Serena and Mandy, who were conversing quietly. Tom passed them silently so as not to provoke another hug attack and sneaked out of the common room.

The Great Hall was a bustle of noise. Larkin was chewing on her lip, apparently disinterested by her waffles. "What's going on?" Tom asked.

She looked up suddenly, as though coming out of a trance. "What? Oh, hi, Tom. Apparently, Serena and Mandy's folks weren't the only ones to get killed. Millie Bertram and Eudora Mortimer in Hufflepuff both lost their fathers. Lucy Chubb's father's dead--"

"Really?" Tom stared over at the Gryffindors in disbelief. Lucy was not with them.

"Then there's the Ravenclaw crowd. They've been hit especially hard. Fowler and Humphrey Tibor lost their mum and dad. So did Tecla Laban. Zelda Stockley's uncle's insane. Too many shots of the Cruciatus Curse. He's in St. Mungo's."

Tom suddenly realized that there was someone else missing from the Ravenclaw table. "Where's Lili?" he asked, frowning.

Larkin sighed. "Her dad's in bad shape. Took a lot of powerful curses. I had a word with her, she's not taking it very well. I think she went back to her common room."

Tom nodded glumly and looked up at the staff table. Dippet looked gloomy, but Dumbledore was clearly furious. He had a copy of *The Daily Prophet* in front of him and was reading the article about the Aurors' assault on Grindelwald in France. He kept looking up at all the empty seats,

and his face would darken even more. Tom thought how little he would like to be at the receiving end of that anger.

It was very hard for Tom to concentrate in class that day. He was so distracted by the recent developments that he almost forgot to go to the Dueling Club that night. However, he spotted Francis at dinner, then remembered his challenge. His face tensed, and he shot Francis a venomous glance. Francis merely smirked back and continued to brag to his third-year friends, a couple of burly bullies named Magnus Crabbe and Ulmer Goyle.

At nine o'clock sharp, Tom returned to the Great Hall, his wand in his hand. Many other students were there, as well. The House tables had vanished, and where the staff table usually was, there was a raised platform. None of Tom's closest friends had signed up, but he did recognize a few of the older students. He saw Francis, Magnus, and Ulmer near the platform, with Richard Zabini hopping up and down, trying to get their attention.

Professor Flitwick hurried onto the platform and shot purple sparks into the air from his wand. The crowd fell silent. Flitwick instructed them on some basic curses and hexes, the basic battle stances, and dueling rituals. "Now, partner up!" he squeaked, his high-pitched voice cracking slightly. He was so excited that he fell off his stool, landing in a crumpled pile on the platform. Tom rushed forward to make sure that Flitwick was all right, but apparently the little teacher was quite used to falling from such heights. He stood up hastily, nothing injured but his dignity.

"Remember our challenge, Riddle?" Francis sneered.

"How could I forget?" Tom replied spitefully, eyes glimmering.

Richard Zabini, looking very neglected, paired up with Courtney Gunther, a rather pretty Muggle-born Ravenclaw third-year. Magnus and Ulmer, naturally, partnered with each other. "Everyone ready?" Flitwick cried. "Battle stances." Tom could not suppress a giggle as Francis tripped over the hem of his robes. Blushing slightly, Francis got to his feet. "Now, bow."

Both Tom and Francis bowed in the same way; very slightly, hands on their wands, faces upturned. Tom remembered from his Muggle history lessons that bowing that way in Elizabethan times (as opposed to bowing with open arms and an inclined head) was a sign of insolent mistrust and usually provoked a violent response. He smiled mockingly at Francis, who returned the look with a vengeance. Professor Flitwick counted down, and when he reached one, the duels started.

Before Francis could get his hand on his wand properly, Tom had drawn his own. "*Furunculus*," Tom said immediately, and Francis stumbled backward. His shoulder had been covered with boils. As Francis attempted a simple Body-Bind spell, Tom reflected it, and it hit the wall instead. He then hit Francis with a spell that bowled him over and caused his hair to turn into feathers.

Furiously, Francis raised his wand and brought it down, screaming, "*Mathuro!*"

Tom managed to reflect this one, too, and it hit its conjurer. Francis's ears sprouted with leeks. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Tom decided to try out a little of the human transfiguration he had learned in his book. Murmuring an incantation, he sent a jet of semitransparent light in Francis's direction. All of the nearby duelers stopped and laughed. Francis had become a tiny, cranky-looking lobster, wielding his pincers and clicking. Another spell, and Francis the Lobster's pincers had been bound by conjured rubber bands.

Horrified, Professor Flitwick hurtled through the crowd. Tom was standing by, watching, a triumphant smile on his face, as Francis the Lobster scuttled from person to person, clearly

begging to be restored. Flitwick picked up the lobster and tapped it with his wand. An instant later, Francis was standing in front of Professor Flitwick, his face so red that he still looked vaguely like a lobster.

"You!" he spluttered, turning to Tom. Tom surveyed him mildly, still grinning. "What was that? Hexes only!"

"Nobody ever stated that rule," Tom said calmly, examining his wand. He wanted to avoid Francis's eyes, lest he burst out laughing.

"Legal move, Mr. Malfoy," Flitwick declared. "Nice bit of transfiguration there, Riddle. I'll be sure to tell Professor Dumbledore."

If Tom had been less modest, he would have smirked at Francis and said, "HA!" However, Tom merely allowed himself a neutral smile and thanked Professor Flitwick for the compliment. Francis looked livid.

"YOU'RE LETTING HIM OFF?" he shrieked. "HE TURNED ME INTO A LOBSTER!" Flitwick shot him a reprimanding look. Francis ignored it. "He TURNED me into a bloody LOBSTER! Doesn't that mean anything to you people?" Ulmer, Magnus, and Richard glowered at Tom, but he simply grinned at them.

After rotating partners until midnight, Tom left the Great Hall with the rest of the club. He had beaten every single dueler he had faced, which surprised nobody. Slightly disappointed though he was that he did not get the chance to duel Philip Cedric, Tom had thoroughly enjoyed himself.

His face fell when he passed the suits of armor on the way up the stairs. Lili and a tall blonde Ravenclaw fourth-year were talking gloomily. The older Ravenclaw girl looked sympathetic, and Lili looked very teary. Tom immediately pushed through the crowd and hastened over. "You all right, Lili?" he asked.

Lili looked up. Her dark brown eyes were extremely shiny. Seeing Tom, she burst into hysterical tears. The fourth-year Ravenclaw patted her on the arm. "She just got word," she told Tom in a quiet voice. "Her dad died in St. Mungo's."

Tom suddenly felt extremely awkward. He never knew what to do in these situations. "I'm sorry, Lili," he said finally. When she did not respond, Tom sighed and hied back to the Slytherin common room.

13. Halloween

However, Tom enjoyed his night classes almost more than he did his daytime ones. Dueling, of course, was fun. Tom kept trying to get to Philip Cedric, but Professor Flitwick, who was well aware of their enmity, was intent on keeping them apart. Tom liked the other classes even more. There was Song Magic, which was concerned with the properties of the voice in conjunction with magical occurrences. For instance, singing certain notes in succession would get different effects. This class was also rather dangerous, because if Tom sang the wrong note, he could end up with an angry turkey on his head instead of transforming a beetle into a button. Rankin Prewitt, to Tom's amusement, found this out the hard way. His next class, the Magical Artist's Guild, was all about making moving paintings. By far, his favorite night class was Ghost Studies, which taught him all about the various kinds of ghosts, and their powers and purposes.

With these classes as well as regular curricular classes, Tom found that he had very little time to himself, save for the weekends. He cherished his free time, but far preferred working to playing. This was not only because of his own personal opinion, but because he thought that he needed as much magical training as possible if he really was to defeat Grindelwald. After he had heard about what Grindelwald did to the parents of several of his friends, Tom was more determined than ever to make the Dark wizard's job a lot harder.

Late in October, there came a whole new challenge that had little to do with academics. At the end of Potions on a gloomy Friday, Professor Chapman addressed the class. "As most of you probably already know," he began, "students in the second through seventh year are allowed to attend the annual Halloween dance in one week's time." There was an excited burst of chatter from the girls, which took a while to subside. "Students in the second and third year are also allowed to take first-years as guests to the dance. The dance will follow the Halloween feast at nine o'clock, and any night classes on that day will be cancelled. All students are required to go, though you are not required to take a partner. You may wear either dress robes or a costume."

Tom's face fell as he realized that a couple of Gryffindor girls were looking pointedly at him and whispering. He winced and turned back to the teacher, but Professor Chapman simply dismissed them. Feeling mildly ill, Tom gathered up his bookbag and his cauldron and made for the dungeon exit. A Gryffindor girl, Marina Edwards, blocked his way, blushing. "Want to go to the dance with me?" she asked eagerly.

"No thanks," Tom replied immediately, trying to push past. Marina, looking very hurt, stepped aside, but at the top of the steps, Tom collided head-on with Ambika Dawes. Ambika tossed her golden hair and smiled at him. "Pardon me," Tom said.

Ambika's luminous smile widened. "Well?" she asked, clearly expecting something. After a couple of seconds, she prompted him. "Aren't you going to ask me to the ball?" Tom frowned darkly at her, wondering how she could be so full of herself.

"I'm not interested," he snapped. He tried to pass her, but Ambika threw out an elegant white arm to stop him.

"Are you sure?" she said, staring at him intently. Tom realized she was trying to use her veela-powers on him, but he felt nothing. A few passing boys were not so lucky; they stopped dead and stared at Ambika as though in a trance. "I think you'll come with me," she said, mistaking his amused look for submission.

"No, actually. Good day to you, Ambika." Tom strode away, leaving Ambika looking furious.

Over the next few days, Tom said "No" more times than he had in his entire life. He had never noticed it before, but almost every girl up to the third year thought that he was attractive, and almost all of them had asked him to the dance by the next Tuesday. Neither Lili nor any of the Slytherin girls had asked him, though on Wednesday, Mandy Birch broke the mold. Unfortunately, very unlike the others, she would not take no for an answer. For the rest of the week, she kept ambushing him in the hallway and asking him for the thousandth time. "You're going to look pretty dumb going there by yourself," she kept saying, until Tom knew her routine so well that he could finish her sentences for her.

"I don't understand why you don't just give in," Zuhayr told him at dinner. It was a Friday, the day before Halloween, and Mandy had just made another unsuccessful attempt at asking Tom to the dance. "I mean, she's quite pretty."

Tom looked along the table at Serena and Mandy, and he supposed that both of the Birches could be considered pretty. "I guess. I just don't like girls that way."

"So? Go as friends. That's what me and Larkin are doing."

"Larkin and I," Tom corrected dully, "and I don't think Mandy wants to go just as friends. She seems to fancy me." He sighed wearily and glanced back over at Mandy. Her silvery hair fell down her back, and her forest-green eyes were flecked with viridian, twinkling in her striking face. She met Tom's eyes and beamed, blushing.

Zuhayr shrugged. "Fine. Dump a good opportunity. Frankly, I think she's gorgeous. But if you don't want to go to the dance with her, there's nothing I can do about it."

"Okay," Tom said, and Zuhayr groaned.

"That is NOT what you're supposed to say! You're supposed to realize that it IS a good opportunity, walk over there, and ASK her!" Zuhayr was clearly growing frustrated. "I'll curse you if you don't." Tom snorted with laughter. Zuhayr could not duel for beans, and was well known for it. "I'll curse you in your sleep," he added, "when you have your guard down."

Tom weighed his options. Though a very slow dueler, Zuhayr could perform curses well. On the other hand, if he agreed, he would have to go with Mandy. Deciding he'd take a curse over having to dance with a girl, he sighed and turned back to his Yorkshire pudding. Zuhayr looked very disappointed.

On Halloween morning, Tom went down to breakfast later than anyone else, though it hardly mattered, seeing as it was Saturday. As it always was when Tom came down late, Professor Dumbledore was the only one left in the Great Hall. He was reading *The Daily Prophet*, looking grim. Tom set down his things and tried to eat silently, but his fork kept on scraping the plate. Finally, Professor Dumbledore looked up at him. He smiled, though Tom could tell that the teacher was far less than happy. "Hello, Tom," he said, sounding almost mournful.

"Hi. Er...is something wrong?"

"Astute, aren't you?" Dumbledore said. "Well, seeing as you'll probably find out anyway, I'll tell you. Grindelwald attacked a small school of magic in Limerick. He gained several very talented young people as followers, and killed the rest of the children. He's getting closer."

"Closer to whom?"

"To England," Dumbledore replied heavily, folding up his paper. "I'm no mindreader, but I know how these people think. My guess is, he wants to station followers in the countries all around Britain, then attack London."

Tom nodded, feeling the blood drain out of his face. It suddenly occurred to him that he really did need to know all the magic he could, Circle member or otherwise. Even if he did not have to defeat a Dark wizard, he knew he would at least have to defend himself. "Professor Dumbledore, there's something I have to ask you."

"Yes?"

"Can you teach me how to become an Animagus?"

Professor Dumbledore proceeded to give Tom his trademark penetrating stare, eyes slightly narrowed. "Why?"

Tom shrugged. It was really too complicated to explain. He just felt naturally drawn to the idea, as though it was a magnet and he was a chip of metal. "I think it sounds interesting," he said truthfully.

"You're awfully young."

"I know," Tom replied, feeling very self-conscious. "You say I am advanced, though. Do you think I might be able to manage it?"

Professor Dumbledore considered this, and his blue eyes twinkled. "I do not doubt it. I'll have to consult the heads of the Improper Use of Magic Office and the Juvenile Magic Department. If I tell them that you're a model student, they might give me permission to start teaching you."

"Really? Thank you, Professor!" Tom grinned, and Dumbledore's mustache twitched.

"Speaking of which, Professor Xavier has some books that might interest you. I've been asking for them on your behalf. They're ridiculously advanced, so they should suit you just fine."

"What are they?" Tom asked curiously.

Dumbledore sipped his orange juice. "A lot of things about dementors," he responded. "You know what those are, don't you?"

"All I know is that they guard Azkaban, and that Grindelwald uses them for stormtroopers," Tom said.

"Well, you should find these books very interesting. They're at a seventh-year level, each over seven hundred pages long, lots of interesting spells. Right up your alley, I'd say. Anyway, I'll get those to you as soon as I see Professor Xavier."

"All right. Thanks," Tom said, turning back to his waffles. Though Tom did not notice it, Professor Dumbledore gave him a very scrutinizing look before getting up and leaving.

At a quarter to nine, Tom headed back up to his dormitory after the Halloween feast. He was truly dreading what was coming next, for somehow he got the impression that the girls had still not given up on him. Forlornly, he changed into his dress robes, which were pitch-black velvet with silver brocades. Tom knew it was rather gothic of him to insist upon wearing black, but it

matched his hair color, and, currently, his mood. He swept down the stairs irritably, hoping against hope that he could avoid Mandy.

Larkin and Zuhayr were standing at the bottom of the stairs, chatting. Zuhayr was wearing dark blue, but Larkin had selected a garment of ridiculously bright canary yellow with lurid purple hems. Tom thought that Larkin, as usual, was not taking this seriously, and he wondered vaguely if she would glow in the dark. Somehow, she had forced that oddly frizzy hair of hers into a ponytail, which was already beginning to fall out. When she saw him, she grinned broadly. "Happy Halloween!" she shouted. "Hey, Tom, can you turn Francis into a lobster again? Lobsters are my favorite animals."

Francis heard this and was none too pleased. He strode over, wrinkling his nose. "Can it, Mallory."

"Don't think I can, I've never heard of canned lobster," Larkin shrugged, a maniacal grin on her face. "C'mon, Zuhayr, let's go." She grabbed Zuhayr's arm and dashed out of the portrait hole, leaving Tom to deal with Francis on his own.

Francis glared after her, then turned to Tom, his usual smirk plastered on his face. He was wearing grey dress robes that matched his cold eyes. "I see you look the part, Hamlet," Francis said, his eyes taking in Tom's outfit. He did have a point; with his heavy black robes and world-weary expression, Tom looked very much like the Shakespearean character after whom Francis had nicknamed him. "All you need is a skull, and you can start reciting 'to be or not to be.'"

Tom scoffed. "You obviously haven't read the play, Francis. The bit with the skull is about two acts after that line."

Francis looked abashed. "Are you sure?" he asked, but he quickly stopped himself, not wanting to look stupid. "Well, anyway, Mudblood, who're you going with?"

Not willing to discuss the matter with Francis, Tom shoved him out of the way and made for the portrait hole. He spotted Mandy and Serena standing close together, both wearing lavender. Apparently, Mandy had found some other boy who actually wanted to go with her. She looked thoroughly depressed. Before she could pick him out of the crowd, Tom hurried down the stairs to the entrance hall.

All sorts of people were milling around the hall, waiting for the doors to open. Ambika Dawes was decked out in frost-blue and was clinging to Philip Cedric's arm. When she sighted Tom, she gave him what she apparently thought was a seductive wink. Tom smiled back sarcastically and had to veer out of the way as several boys behind him swooned.

When the doors did open, Tom immediately dashed in, took a seat in the corner, and drew a few sheets of parchment, a quill, a bottle of ink, and a few Muggle pencils from his pocket. For the first hour of the dance, Tom busied himself with sketching random people. After he had drawn what felt like the entire school and staff, Tom grew tired of drawing. Idly, he unscrewed the cap of his ink bottle, dipped his quill in, and wrote his name on a piece of parchment in block capital letters.

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Tom frowned down at the name. He did not mind the name Tom, except for the fact that it had been his father's name, as well. Thomas Riddle had been, from what Tom had heard, a bit of a snob, not to mention what he had done to Tom's mother. Tom decided that he needed a nickname, something besides Tommy Salami, Mudblood, Pun, or Hamlet. He wanted to distance

himself from his father as much as possible, and bearing his name made this rather hard. "I could just go by Marvolo," Tom thought. It was the only part of his name he thought was at all respectable. No, this would not do. It was too short, and not very impressive.

"I am... I am..." Tom bit his lip and frowned. What could be a suitable name? He suddenly noticed that the letters for "I am" were in his name. Tom crossed them out, until the letters that were left read, "TOMRVOLORDDLE." Beneath this, he wrote "I am" in the same large handwriting. He stared at this for a while, then glanced back up at his name, which was now missing three letters. After a few minutes, Tom noticed something interesting. With the "I" in "Riddle" crossed out, the last letters of his middle name combined with the first letters of his modified last name, making the word "Lord." Being a Lord certainly inspired respect in people. Eagerly, he crossed out the letters and wrote "Lord" right next to "I am."

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE
I AM LORD

Tom reversed the letters of his first name so that they read "MOT." What could he do with this? If he inserted the "R" in Marvolo between the "O" and the "T," he would have the word "Mort." In pretty much any country whose language was derived from Latin, "Mort" meant "death." That would certainly make people respect him, or at least make it so that they would not want to mess with him. Deciding it was a perfect suffix for a name, he wrote it down, crossing off the letters.

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE
I AM LORD _____ MORT

This left him with "VODLE." Vodle-mort? That sounded silly. However, switching the "D" and the "L" made the word "Voldemort," which sounded much better, and was easier to say. Satisfied with the operation, Tom scribbled it down, scratched out the remaining letters, and looked at his handiwork.

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE
I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

Tom smiled slightly. "I am Lord Voldemort," he murmured under his breath. It was really quite clever, when you thought about it. It was not too much of a mouthful, but long enough, spooky-sounding enough, to keep people out of his way. Too bad he could not get a last name in there, but if anyone asked, he could just say that his name was Voldemort Salamair. If he truly trusted the person, he would tell the person that he was Voldemort Slytherin, and make Salamair his middle name. Lord Voldemort. Voldemort Salamair Slytherin.

"Tom?" asked a voice suddenly.

Tom blanched and shoved the parchment into his bag. He saw Lili standing in front of him, her hair up in a bun. She was wearing robes that looked like layered, translucent linen of every color in the spectrum. Her robes seemed to change colors when she moved. Though Tom did not notice it, anyone else would have said she was beautiful. "Hi, Lili," he said.

"Can I sit here?" she asked, indicating the chair next to him.

"Sure." Tom hoped she had not seen the paper. Lili seemed very depressed, and it took Tom a short while to remember that her father had died. "You all right?"

Lili sighed. "Not really," she said heavily. "At least I can function again." There was an awkward pause.

"Er... so, what did you think of the Quidditch match last week?" Tom had not had much interest in this match, as it had been between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff.

Lili brightened a bit. "It was interesting. Except--you know--when Rankin Prewitt got hit by a Bludger." Tom had to stifle a grin. He and Rankin, though not exactly mortal enemies, disliked each other, and Tom had quite enjoyed watching him get hit by that Bludger. "I think that Tecla Laban was brilliant in that match. Did you see the save she pulled when--" She stopped suddenly, for the candles had suddenly grown brighter, and torches abruptly blazed in their brackets.

Someone entered the Great Hall, a black-haired young woman with dusty-looking robes and a look of pure terror on her face. "Armando!" she cried, dashing over to the headmaster.

"Armando, he's here, he's..." She trailed off and collapsed on the flagstones, apparently from exhaustion. Dippet immediately knelt and revived her.

"What's all this? Who are y--Medéa McGonagall? What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the Juvenile Magic Department?"

"The Ministry sent me here!" Medéa McGonagall gasped. "I was the only person who could fly fast enough." She indicated a battered broomstick in her hand. "Please, I'm supposed to tell you, to warn you. Grindelwald has invaded England!"

Dippet let go of her shoulders in shock, and Medéa, still weak, fell backwards onto the stone floor again. There was utter silence in the Great Hall, and the dancers were frozen in their positions, all staring at the newcomer. Tom felt strangely blank. It could not be, not now, he was not prepared to face a Dark wizard yet...

"Where is he?" Professor Dumbledore asked her sharply.

"He attacked in some coastal town," Medéa replied. "Channing, I think the village was called. Not a wizard in the place, but he leveled it anyway. Over five hundred Muggles dead--horribly so. He used excessive amounts of the Cruciatus Curse to kill most of them, and did even worse things to the rest." Medéa shuddered. "Had all those little Irish kids doing terrible things to the people. You know, the kids he took from that school in Limerick. Some of them seem really strong. There's no doubt where he's headed once he's done massacring villages. London."

"What can we do?" Professor Xavier asked frantically.

Medéa sighed. "The Minister just needed you to know. He's going to need as much support from you lot as possible." As she stood up, Tom noticed that she was at least six months pregnant.

"D'you have a place I can stay the night? I don't much like the idea of going back out there in the wee hours, and I don't think I can take another eight hours on a broomstick."

"Sure, we can set you up in the hospital wing. Why didn't you Apparate to Hogsmeade?" Professor Dippet inquired.

"Can't. You aren't allowed to do it in my present condition." She patted her stomach, and Dippet, noticing it for the first time, nodded. The school nurse, Madam Viola, ushered Medéa out of the room.

"Students to bed," Professor Dippet said, his creaky voice hoarser than usual. "Go on then, chop, chop."

The student body moved silently out of the Great Hall, and Tom headed up to Slytherin Tower with Larkin, Zuhayr, and Adrian. He was so shocked that he did not know what to think. This was too soon, he needed more time.

"Relax," said a voice in his brain. "You're not Tommy Salami. You're Lord Voldemort. You can handle anything." Tom tried to feel better, tried to take the voice's advice. He did not notice that the voice that had counseled him was the nasty little voice he usually tried to ignore.

14. Of Curses, Demetors and Animagi

On the fifth of November, Medéa McGonagall finally seemed to have recovered from her grand adventure. She ventured out of the hospital wing and began conversing with students in the hallways. Tom quickly befriended her. She was very nice, and had a particular knowledge of the art of the Animagus, one to rival Professor Dumbledore's. "It's a family tradition," she explained. "All of the women in my bloodline have been Animagi. I can turn into a bluebird at will, but it's dangerous to transform when you're pregnant. It could hurt he baby." Medéa let the students put forth suggestions about what to name her child-to-be, and Tom noticed that she decided on one of his own suggestions, Minerva, as a good name for a girl. Though she should really have gone back to the Ministry, Medéa simply sent owls in to work daily. She truly seemed to prefer milling around Hogwarts to going in to work.

Meanwhile, the news of Grindelwald seemed to get worse and worse. Village massacres were turning into a daily event, and any Aurors who went after Grindelwald or one of his supporters usually were killed or injured awfully. Once, when retrieving a *Daily Prophet* for a friend, he found a photograph of one of the murdered villages in one of the inner pages. Feeling numb, Tom had gone down to breakfast again, given Larkin her paper, and rushed back to the dormitory. For the rest of November, Tom had dreadful nightmares about it; dead people strewn all across the green, a line of young but maniacal-looking Irish children standing over them, and the specter from Tom's dream praising them on their good work.

One Saturday in late November, Tom woke up early in a cold sweat. He had had countless nightmares, including various versions of his old nightmare, and the new one seemed to be even more persistent. Shakily, he pulled on his robes and stumbled down the stairs. He halted at the bottom, though, for he heard voices outside the door.

"He's a bit young, wouldn't you say, Albus?" Medéa McGonagall was saying skeptically. "Twelve, is it?"

"Thirteen in two weeks," Professor Dumbledore replied. Tom realized with a jolt that they were talking about him. His birthday would be on Thursday two weeks from that date. "And as I've told you already, he is exponentially talented, particularly in Transfiguration. He is leading his class, *and* he takes lessons with the seventh-years. I have no doubt in my mind that he would be able to pull it off."

"How good is he?"

"Good. He turned a classmate into a lobster; that sort of magic is very advanced even for a seventeen-year-old, but at thirteen, it is astounding."

"And taking transfiguration so lightly is also a sign that he will not take this seriously."

"He will, Medéa. The boy is a bit of a firebrand, I'll admit, but he certainly takes things seriously." Tom flushed with anger. *Firebrand?* He wasn't *that* hotheaded, what was Professor Dumbledore playing at? "In fact, he takes things too seriously. Trust me, if you let him do this, he'll be spending hours in the library, and he'll probably have it done in only a few months. He's one of those who'll never give up. Give him the chance, and Tom will probably set a world record for fastest person to learn to become an Animagus."

"All right, all right. I'll have to have a chat with him first. Do you want me to help you teach him?"

"That would be greatly appreciated. I'll go get him."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Tom said sharply, throwing open the door. The common room was deserted except for the teacher and the Ministry worker, who both looked stricken at Tom's sudden appearance.

"Tom," said Medéa, smiling. "Come and have a seat with us, we were just talking about you."

"I know. I have good ears." Tom folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe, still irked at being called a firebrand. "You're going to let me do it, then?"

Medéa nodded. She proceeded to explain the rules and the Ministry guidelines, while Tom listened intently. "Once you're done, we'll have to register you, you know. What kind of animal you are, your markings. We have to make sure you don't misuse it."

"I understand, and I thank you for the opportunity," Tom replied. "So, can you decide which animal you want to be?" Tom was not picky about animals, as long as he did not wind up a dog. Tom hated dogs. He had been terrified of them ever since he was five years old, when an angry dog had scratched his right arm deeply. It left him with livid scars on his arm, which were an odd fuschia color and ran from his shoulder to the middle of his forearm.

"You can't choose, unfortunately. It's rather like being Sorted into a Hogwarts House, you get the animal based on your personality traits." Tom was slightly disappointed, but he sighed with relief. He was not exactly playful, and loyalty was definitely not his strong point. It looked like a dog was out of the question.

"We'll start your lessons this evening, at nine o'clock sharp in the Transfiguration room. If you can find anything in the library on the subject, be sure to read it," said Professor Dumbledore. That was a given, of course, for Tom practically lived in the library. "That will be all, Tom. Go on down to breakfast."

"Yes, sir," Tom replied. He pushed open the portrait and strode out of the common room.

Professor Dumbledore sighed heavily and turned to face Medéa again. "I don't know what to think of that boy," he said. "Every time I turn around, I hear of some other amazing magical feat he's pulled off. It usually has something to do with transfiguration or dueling. I'm not sure of his heritage, but I know there are some very powerful wizards in his background. Maria and Marvolo Salamair, to name two. On top of this, Grindelwald wants something with him. Tom received a Dark Arts book last Christmas. Though he doesn't know it, I've managed to intercept eight other messages and books from Grindelwald."

"Well, he's clearly powerful," Medéa said reasonably. "He probably wants the poor boy as a follower."

"Grindelwald would not be so persistent if Tom were just an ordinary boy. I know there's something special about him. I know you think that prophecy is tosh, but Tom could easily be the eleventh or twelfth member of the Circle of Light. Either that, or he's..."

"Tom doesn't seem much like a Dark Heir to me," Medéa responded. "Has a bit of a temper on him, to be sure, but his heart's in the right place."

"I hope so," Dumbledore sighed. "In any case, all I know is that I have to keep him away from Grindelwald. God knows what could happen if he got a hold of that boy. He's powerful and brilliant, a deadly combination. It would be Limerick all over again, but ten times worse."

Tom's day had been going downhill since Medéa McGonagall had told him he could become an Animagus. He was very much looking forward to the evening's lesson--but first he had to get through the day. Feeling very grumpy by the end of a particularly bad Double Potions with the Gryffindors, Tom stormed up to the library to do some afternoon studying. He showed the cranky Squib librarian, Mr. Lamont, the permission slip Dumbledore had given him to explore the Restricted Section for Animagus information. Tom threw his bookbag over his shoulder and stepped over the rope separating it from the rest of the library.

He quickly found the right book. It was called *The Craft of the Animagi*, and it was at least four thousand pages long. That done, Tom got up and started to leave, but he stopped. His eye had picked out a skinny black book with gold lettering. *The Unforgivable Curses*, it said. Tom's mind was whirring. He did need to know all the magic he could get his hands on if he wanted to defeat Grindelwald, and the Unforgivables were certainly good for self-defense. A little harsh, but effective. Tom tried to walk away, but his curiosity got the better of him. He snatched the book and placed an Opticus Charm on it so that it would look like something for Transfiguration. Before his conscience could nag him, he rushed out of the library and back up to Slytherin Tower.

When Tom reached his dormitory, he flung himself onto his bed, whipped the drapes shut, and conjured another ball of bluish fire by which to read. Part of his brain was screaming in protest, but Tom ignored it. By four o'clock, he had read the instructions on each of the curses. When he had finally finished the book, Tom sighed and closed it slowly. He was not sure what had compelled him to do it, but now he had finished, he felt distinctly ill. As he was getting up to take it back, something in his mind stopped him. Was he powerful enough to perform the Unforgivable Curses? If he did not use them on a human, and was discreet about it, it would not be a problem.

It was at that moment that Nepenthe slithered out from the shadows, chasing after a plump white rat that had probably once been a student's pet. Tom hated rats, so guilt would not be a problem... With catlike precision, he pounced on it and seized it by its wormlike tail. The creature was squealing like a piglet. "That was going to be my lunch!" Nepenthe said indignantly.

"It still can be," Tom murmured absently. He conjured a wooden table in the middle of the room, then charmed invisible walls around the edges, so that the rat could not escape. Tom made sure that the door to the dormitory was safely locked and dropped the rat into the enclosed space on the tabletop. The creature kept squeaking crossly.

Nepenthe was very angry indeed. "What are you doing?" he demanded, coiling around a nearby bedpost to watch the operation. "Honesssstly, if this is jussst to try out ssssome new hex of yours--"

"They're important hexes," Tom insisted rather loftily. "Now be quiet for a second, I need to concentrate." He took a deep breath and released it slowly, shutting his eyes. When he opened them, he stared at the rat as though fascinated by it. In one swift movement, he lifted his wand and aimed it at the rat, crying, "*Imperio!*"

The rat suddenly stopped squeaking. It gazed around blankly, seemingly in a trance. "Do a back-flip," Tom invoked softly. The rat proceeded to do a perfect back-flip. Tom felt a sudden rush of adrenaline. He realized that if he mastered this curse, he could make people do anything, absolutely anything he wanted. His mind filled with vengeful thoughts. He could make Francis

tap dance with a lampshade on his head; he could make Philip crash his broomstick... The list went on and on.

"Okay, um... sing," he commanded. The rat began squeaking out the tune to the national anthem. Tom put a hand to his ear. "Shut up, you're killing the music! Hmm... act like a turkey." The rat scampered around on its hind legs, trying to peck things, irritably chirping in a way that sounded vaguely like a gobble. Tom had a little fun with the Imperius Curse before lifting it. The next one was the one he had heard about the most, the infamous and terrible Cruciatus Curse. He swallowed hard, relaxed again, and glared at the rat, which was panting from doing a number of gymnastics. Feeling extremely nervous, Tom raised his wand and brought it down through the air. "*Crucio!*" he yelled.

The rat went suddenly rigid and collapsed, twitching and flailing. It was yelping at the top of its tiny lungs, eyes bugging out and rolling around in its head. Tom nearly dropped his wand in horror, and his hands were trembling. However, as with the last curse, a rush of cruel thoughts came into his head, and however nauseated he was by the idea, Tom thought it might be rather fun to see, for instance, Mr. Carney in that kind of pain. Tom lifted the curse, and the rat, shuddering and still twitching convulsively, got to its feet. Tom might have been imagining it, but it looked like there were tears in its eyes.

"Sssstop!" Nepenthe said sharply. His golden eyes were wide. "Masssster, what are you doing? Those were Unforgivable Curssses, are you mad?"

"Maybe," Tom whispered. There was a murderous, twisted smile on his face, and his eyes were gleaming scarlet. He was briefly possessed by an awful sort of joy, one that was completely lacking in mirth but which simply consisted of a sadistic euphoria. Nepenthe looked terrified, and he shrank away. Tom ignored his pet and whirled on the rat again. For the first time in his life, Tom looked truly and utterly evil. Feeling entirely confident now, Ton raised his wand, shouting, "*Avada Kedavra!*" Instantly, there was a blinding flash of green light, a rushing noise, and the poor rodent was put out of its misery. Tom's eyes suddenly returned to turquoise, and they were wide and stricken. All color had left his face, and he raised a quivering hand to his mouth. He sank onto his trunk, still staring at the dead rat.

He swore softly, running a hand through his jet-black hair. Nepenthe slithered down the bedpost and crept off toward his basket, and Tom could tell that he was scared out of his wits. For that matter, so was Tom. He rocked backward and forward on the trunk, still stunned. Something--he was not sure what it was--something had taken over. For an awful minute, Tom had not been himself. He had been something so incredibly evil that it sent shivers down his spine to think about it. To be sure, most of the time Tom was no angel. He was moody, aloof, spontaneous, temperamental, impulsive. But he was not evil, not at all. What had happened?

"Nepenthe," he called. Nepenthe did not answer, and Tom did not blame him. "I'm sorry," he whispered to nobody in particular. "I'm so, so sorry!" Though he was tall for his age and still growing, Tom felt extremely small, as though being overpowered by someone bigger than himself. Shivering violently, he got to his feet and evaporated the table. The rat fell to the floor. "Nepenthe, you can have the rat now."

"I've losssst my appetite," Nepenthe shot back coldly. Tom was too miserable to be angry. He evaporated the rat, took the book and burned it in the fireplace, and threw open the door and dashed down to the common room. His heart was going like mad, and there was a burning sensation behind his eyes.

Because it was Saturday, the common room was packed. Tom picked an armchair away from the others and set to work on the Animagus book. He gave up on it soon, unable to concentrate. Daphne Gatefield noticed him and came over. "Hello, Tom," Daphne said. "Why the long face?"

"I'm just tired," Tom announced quietly.

"You look very sick," Daphne said, unceremoniously pushing his bangs out of his eyes and feeling his forehead. "You have a fever, Tom. You should go see Madam Viola."

"I'm okay, Daphne," Tom groaned, shrinking away from her hand.

"Mmmm." Daphne looked skeptical. "Well, I have to go now. I have to meet someone."

"Who?"

"Nathan," Daphne replied. "Nathan Potter. My boyfriend--he's in fourth year." She giggled despite herself.

"Oh. I see." Tom rolled his eyes, thinking that thirteen was far too young to be romantically involved. "Goodbye, then." Daphne nodded and hurried off. Tom struggled to remember who Nathan Potter was, but he was too distracted by his own thoughts to bother.

That night, Tom had more nightmares than he had ever had in his life.

By the middle of Christmas break, Tom was getting very close to becoming an Animagus. Médéa had left for a week and returned with an adorable baby girl, Minerva. This was good not only because Minerva was a very entertaining little creature, but because Tom had the added example provided by Médéa. When she and Dumbledore transformed into the respective bluebird and bumblebee, it was a lot easier for Tom to understand than when it had just been the bumblebee.

On Christmas Eve, Tom headed down to his Animagus lesson feeling very excited. Professor Dumbledore had told him that he was finally ready to transform, which was amazing, considering that Tom had been studying it for about than a month. Professor Dumbledore and Médéa McGonagall met him in the Transfiguration room. Professor Chapman was there as well with the Restoration Potion in case Tom bunged up. "Are you ready, Tom?" Professor Dumbledore asked.

Going very pale, Tom nodded. He wondered what kind of animal he would be. The obvious suggestion would be a snake, but somehow, Tom did not think that was right.

"Okay," Médéa said. "You need to recite the following incantations for your first transformation, and after that, you can do it at will. Repeat after me." She proceeded to emit a series of bizarre sounding words, which Tom repeated. He suddenly felt very strange and lightheaded. He was shrinking, and fur seemed to be sprouting out of his arms. He supposed this meant he was not a snake, at least. He noticed with some amusement that he had a tail of some sort, and that he was growing whiskers.

As promptly as it had begun, the lightheaded feeling dissolved. Tom looked down at his hands, and he saw two white, furry paws. "This is too weird," he tried to say, but a strange, foreign noise escaped his mouth. He looked up and saw the two professors and Médéa McGonagall looking down at him. Médéa and Professor Chapman looked astonished and impressed, and so did Professor Dumbledore, except with Dumbledore, these emotions were mixed with something else that Tom could not read. "What am I?" he demanded. Médéa seemed to understand. She

reached up to a desk and seized a mirror, which she held in front of his face. Tom yelped with shock.

He was a cat. A very pretty, black cat with white paws, a white nose, and a white tip to the tail. The eyes were bright turquoise, just like his human ones, but the pupils were, of course, slits. Médéa reached out and scratched his head, and the irony of the situation suddenly hit him. "I'm a Tom-cat," he thought, and if he had been given human voice, he would have laughed. It looked like his father's name, while not exactly favorable, was at least accurate.

"Turn back into a human now," Professor Dumbledore prompted. Tom thought very hard about becoming human again, and he found himself sitting on the floor, awkwardly tall again, fur-free, and without whiskers. Immediately, he burst out laughing.

"Tom-cat," he gasped between chuckles. "I should have known! Hold on, let me do it again." He turned into the black cat, waited a few seconds, then turned back into himself.

"Tom," Professor Dumbledore said, looking rather grim. "Do you have any idea how advanced that is? Most adults cannot manage that even if they devote their whole lives to it, and now you've figured it out in a month."

"I don't see how that's bad," Tom said, frowning slightly.

Dumbledore sighed. "It isn't bad, just... eerie. Oh, by the way, I got those dementor books for you." He handed Tom a stack of books, all of which were very thick. Professor Dumbledore suddenly smiled, and he turned to Professor Chapman. "Do you want to take bets on how few months it takes him to learn the Patronus Charm?" Chapman gave a rare laugh.

"Patronus?" Tom asked quizzically.

"You'll see," said Professor Chapman. "It's a charm to ward off a dementor."

Tom suddenly felt suspicious. Why did Professor Dumbledore think that Tom needed to know how to ward off dementors? It was not as though he was going to visit Azkaban anytime soon. At that moment, it hit him. Grindelwald used dementors as stormtroopers, as weapons. That meant that Dumbledore must know about what Tom was, or what he thought he was.

"I'll get started on that tonight," Tom said dutifully. "Thank you for teaching me, Mrs. McGonagall."

"It's been a pleasure," said Médéa. "It looks like my work here is done, Albus and Trahern. I'll just go pick up my daughter from the Ravenclaw common room and I'll head back to the Ministry."

"What's Minnie doing in the Ravenclaw common room?" Tom asked.

Médéa laughed. "Lili Po is babysitting her. Very nice girl, great with kids. Well, I'm off."

"Goodbye," the others said in unison. Tom turned to Professor Dumbledore. "Thank you, too, Professor," he said.

"You are quite welcome. Now, unless I'm very much mistaken, your friends are waiting for you in your common room. Off you trot."

Tom strode out of the room, feeling quite pleased. When he was sure nobody was looking, he turned into a cat and dashed along a corridor, resuming his original form when he reached the portrait of the wood nymph. "You make a good cat," the nymph commented.

"Thanks. Antediluvian." The portrait swung open, and Tom clambered inside. His friends, the ones who had stayed for Christmas, were all sitting together, playing Gobstones and Exploding Snap.

"Hi," Larkin said cheerfully. "Ready to tell us where you go every Saturday night or not?" Tom, who had been instructed to keep his teachings a secret, shrugged and sank into an armchair.

"Betcha he has a pretty girlfriend in another House, probably Ravenclaw, and he's been disappearing to meet up with her," Annie suggested. Tom glared at her.

"Nah," said Zuhayr, pretending to sound serious. "He's been slipping off to practice Dark magic in the dungeons."

"No, that's not it," Tom said sharply. "I'd like it to be my business and my business only. And, to answer your question, Annie, Lili is NOT my girlfriend, and I have NOT been sneaking off to visit her. Understood?"

"Mmm hmm," said Annie. "I never suggested that it was Lili."

"It was implied." With that, Tom stood up and left. He truly did not feel like being with his friends. When he got up into the dormitory, he called for Nepenthe, but Nepenthe had been avoiding him ever since he had cursed the rat. Sighing, Tom changed into his pajamas and went to bed, surprisingly sleepy.

Christmas passed without event, and by the thirtieth, Nepenthe was speaking to Tom again. Tom decided that if he ever did have to test the Unforgivable Curses again, he would do it when Nepenthe was not around. The sight of them seemed to terrify Nepenthe, and the cobra remained rather wary of Tom.

New Year's Eve, however, promised to be fun. The second- through seventh-years were allowed to attend the New Year party, and would spend the day in their dress robes to mark the occasion. At eleven o'clock in the evening, Tom headed down the stairs and met up with his friends. He noticed that Larkin's robes did glow in the dark a bit. Most students were wearing their cloaks, and for good reason. The party would be held out on the grounds, and it was freezing outside.

There was a line of poles that ran around the school with fairy lights strung between them, making a twinkling footpath. The groundskeeper, a trollish man called Ogg, had carved several sparkling ice statues, and the Aurora Borealis was swirling beautifully in the sky. After a few minutes, Lili caught up with Tom, Larkin, Zuhayr, and Adrian. "This is amazing," she breathed. "Want to have a snowball fight?"

"No," said Larkin sarcastically. "Come on, let's go!" They dashed down the sloping lawn and immediately scooped up handfuls of the pristine snow, packing them into balls and hurling them at each other. By a quarter until midnight, all of them were caked with snow, rosy, and ecstatic. Everyone was participating in the snowball fight now, even the dignified seventh-years. Tom was not surprised to see Professors Xavier, Twiddly, and Dumbledore enjoying the romp as well, but he was astonished to see the cool, composed Professor Chapman hurling as many snowballs as any student.

Growing a little bored with the standard snowball, Tom sneaked off and made a pile of his own snowballs. He tapped each of them with his wand, crept back up, and hurled two of them at a group of Gryffindors. The snowballs, which were now snow bombs, exploded, splattering

everyone with snow. Soon, everyone was getting in on it, prodding snowballs with their wands and dispersing large crowds of people. It was a raucous good time, and Tom wished it would never end.

Then, horribly, it did.

There was a sudden, deathly silence, even though people were still moving. Tom remembered something he had read in his dementor book; that when a dementor was near, there was utter silence except if someone spoke. People gradually halted, staring around curiously. There was an odd, humming noise coming from the Forbidden Forest. Abruptly, at least one hundred towering, hooded dementors burst from the wood.

Tom had his wand out in a moment. He had never had much luck with the Patronus Charm, but he knew the dementors' fatal power, and he did not want that inflicted on anyone present. "Expecto Patronum!" he yelled, concentrating on the happiest thought he could.

Something tall and white burst forth from his wand. It was in the form of a young woman, with a silvery dress and dark silver hair in long ringlets. Tom took a step back. If that was who he thought it was...

The Patronus looked over her shoulder, and Tom found himself staring into the face of his mother. The Patronus did not speak, but it gave Tom a reassuring smile and strode toward the dementors. At that moment, all of the dementors took deep, rattling breaths, and every happy memory in Tom's mind vanished. The image of his mother flickered and died. Tom's mind was a tangle of misery. Orphanage memories swirled in his head, and there was something about an old woman in white picking him up and carrying him down a pure white hallway, which he did not quite understand. From the screams and sobs of his fellow students, they were being affected the same way by the dementors. Professor Dippet had actually fainted.

That done, the dementors advanced. Tom tried to re-summon the Patronus, but he could not. The instant he came up with a good memory, it was sucked away by another breath from the dementors. With a jolt, he realized that the crowd consisted not just of dementors, but there were some children there, as well. They looked young, only about fourteen or fifteen, and all of them looked familiar... as familiar as the photograph on a newspaper page...

"Should we kill any of them yet, Master?" one of the children called back into the forest. He had a maniacal smile on his face.

At that moment, a man, tall and thin with a mop of fair hair, swept out of the wood. He would have been handsome if his eyes were not bright crimson, and if he had not had such a cruel look on his face. "Leave the brats unless they put up a fight," he roared. "I am here for just one thing." His eyes flicked over to Dumbledore, who was standing resolutely at the top of the hill, his wand out. "Albus Dumbledore, the famous ex-Auror," the man cackled. "I meet you at last. I presume you have heard of me. I am Grindelwald."

15. Winter, Spring and Summer

Grindelwald turned his crimson eyes to Tom, who scowled darkly and whipped out his wand, prepared to fight. The Dark wizard before him laughed a cold laugh, deeper than that of Tom's specter, but just as frigid. "You," he beckoned. He had a very thick accent. "Come here."

Tom backed away, his eyes flashing, but not red. "Stay away from me, Grindelwald," he murmured.

Grindelwald's lips curved upwards. "Brave little brat, aren't you? Let's see just how brave you are. *Crucio!*" Tom's wand slipped out of his hand and he fell into the snow, crying out in pain. It was fifty times worse than any of his beatings, and it felt like every inch of his body was being consumed with flame. He heard the other students run away in terror, and as the curse was mercifully lifted, he felt someone kneel at his side.

"Tom? Tom, are you all right? Say something!" Dumbledore's face swam into view.

"I'm alive," Tom whispered. "My wand... I need my wand."

"Get away from the boy!" Grindelwald commanded. "He is all I want, Albus. Give him to me, and you and your precious school escape unharmed."

Professor Dumbledore glared up at Grindelwald and Tom shakily sat up. He saw his wand about ten feet away. Ignoring the pain he was still feeling, Tom lunged for it, whirled on Grindelwald, and yelled, "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Grindelwald got to his wand in time and blocked the spell, which rebounded and hit one of his young followers. He did not seem to care in the slightest. He pointed his own wand at Dumbledore, who was trying to get to him, and shrieked, "*Impedimenta!*" Dumbledore froze. Smirking, Grindelwald turned to Tom, who had got to his feet. "There is no point in resisting, Riddle," he cackled. "You are brave, I'll give you that. It is something the Dark side could use. Join me, Tom. I will give you power beyond your wildest dreams."

"Why me?" Tom demanded.

"You know why, Riddle. You know what you are. Now, would you like to become my ally, or will I have to work against you?"

Tom narrowed his eyes. "I don't need you," he spat.

"Really?" Grindelwald looked disappointed, but amused. "Well, I'm sorry I have to do this to you, Riddle, but if I have to beat you into submission, that's what I'll do. *Crucio!*"

Again, Tom was possessed by the all-consuming pain. Every bone in his body felt like it had shattered, and hot knives seemed to be splitting his skin open. Grindelwald, laughing, lifted the curse after a very long time, and Tom stumbled to his feet. "Still stubborn?" asked Grindelwald. Tom nodded defiantly, and Grindelwald tried to perform the Cruciatus Curse yet again.

Before the curse hit him, Tom thought fast. He jumped out of the way and performed the counter-curse on Professor Dumbledore. Dumbledore immediately raised his wand and shouted an incantation. Grindelwald reflected this spell, too. "Stand behind me," Dumbledore hissed. Tom obeyed, watching by looking around Dumbledore's left arm. The rest of the school stood up on the hill, watching in disbelief.

Grindelwald was smiling in a seemingly pleasant way. "Now, now, now, Albus, why don't you consider the offer? You know what my dementors are capable of. They could suck the souls out of each and every one of your darling pupils. My children could level this castle in a few minutes. Is it really worth it, all for one little boy?"

Tom sent a whispered hex in Grindelwald's direction. This one impacted, and Grindelwald stumbled. It was the Leg-Locker curse, one of Tom's specialties. Unfortunately, Grindelwald knew the counter-curse, and had it performed in an instant. "It seems you don't want to cooperate, Albus, am I right?"

"You don't get Tom or the other students," Dumbledore said, a sense of fury radiating from him once more.

"Oh, don't I? *Crucio!*" Grindelwald screamed for the fourth time. Dumbledore collapsed, leaving Tom out in the open. Grindelwald smiled, completely ignoring Dumbledore, who was clearly putting his every atom of effort into not crying out. "Now, Tom, why don't you come with me? I can help you avenge yourself upon every person who has ever harmed you. I can help you gain ultimate power."

"I've said it before and I'll say it again," Tom repeated obstinately, "I don't need you." He helped Dumbledore to his feet.

"Oh, but you do," said Grindelwald, eyes glinting. As Grindelwald raised his wand, Tom transformed into a cat and dashed into the Forbidden Forest. "An Animagus? This is better than I thought. Hmm... O'Nally, get him. Take a few dementors with you. If he resists too much, the dementors are allowed to kiss him."

"Yes, Master," responded a girlish voice. Tom's heart rate quickened, as did his footfalls. He ran and ran until he could run no more, and he hid himself inside a shrub, remaining a cat.

Tom stayed in there for what felt like hours. Suddenly, there was a rustling in the leaves nearby. Tom, terrified to see a dementor, instead found himself looking up at a centaur. The centaur had an Arabian body and a head of dark hair. Tom meowed quietly. The centaur made a motion of surprise, then brushed away the leaves of the bush. He stared. "You are a wizard," he said softly. "Reveal yourself." Shivering in the cold, Tom resumed his usual shape. The centaur looked even more astonished. "A child?" He surveyed Tom's face more closely. "A Circle member," he breathed. "What are you doing in the forest, young one?"

"Grindelwald wants to get me," Tom muttered under his breath. "Who are you?"

"I am Miravez. Who are you?"

"Tom Riddle--Lord Voldemort," he added, not really knowing why.

Miravez nodded his shaggy head. "Voldemort--it is an unusual name, but it has been mentioned in the stars. A Lord, you say?"

"Not formally...self proclaimed." Miravez laughed quietly.

"Yes... the twelfth members of both Circles will be Lords. One descended from darkness, the other from light. One self-made, the other, knighted. No particular order, the prophecy does not extend that far. You could be either, my child."

"What do you mean? I... I'm not a member of the Circle of Darkness, am I?"

Miravez stared hard at Tom, and his brow furrowed. "You have both marks upon you, my child."

Tom took a few steps back. "I could be either?"

"That is what I have said." Miravez's eyes moved skyward. "Neptune... you usually cannot see him, but he is there. He is there, and very bright. Look." Tom looked up, and he saw a planet he had never seen before. It was glowing brilliant blue, and it seemed larger even than the brightest planets. "You are in grave danger, little one."

"Hmmm... well, I have dementors who want to kiss me, a Dark wizard after my blood, and a crazed Irish girl on my tail," Tom thought sardonically. "Of course I'm in danger!"

"Follow me, young Voldemort," Miravez murmured. "If I am with you, you will be less likely to be hurt. Perhaps transforming into a cat again would be wise." Tom obeyed, and trotted along at Miravez's heels, the snow feeling bitter against his leathery paws.

There was another rustling sound, and a girl burst into the clearing. She had dark blonde hair and poison-green eyes, a wand in her hand. She would have been beautiful if the look on her face had not been one of pure dementia. As she saw Miravez, her lips curled into a smile. Tom immediately crept into the bushes as silently as possible. "Ah, my centaur friend. Have you seen any little black cats scurrying around?" She had a heavy Irish accent.

"No," Miravez said mournfully.

"Liar. *Avada Kedavra!*" Tom heard the centaur's knees buckle as green light filled the clearing. "Come on, dementors. The little brat must be around here somewhere." Three tall, hooded dementors entered the clearing, whispering in their cold language. Tom backed away. One of the dementors took a deep, rattling breath, and as the little amount of joy Tom had was sucked out of him, the dementor pointed at the spot where Tom lay. Before Tom could react, the girl had reached down and seized Tom by the scruff of his neck. She stared into his face, smirking.

"I've always liked cats," she snarled. The girl, O'Nally, tapped Tom with her wand, and he fell to the ground next to Miravez. He had turned back into a human.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Tom shouted. The girl's wand flew out of her hand, and Tom caught it. She had clearly not been expecting this. The girl backed away, eyes wide. Tom raised his wand again. "*Stupefy.*" The girl keeled over, unconscious. Not keen on being found with an unconscious girl and a dead centaur, Tom snapped the girl's wand in half and hurled it into the bushes, intending to leave.

A cold, clammy hand closed on his shoulder. Tom looked up and saw a dementor glaring down at him. He had completely forgotten about them. Concentrating very hard, Tom summoned up the thought of getting out of the Forbidden Forest alive. That was the happiest thought he could come up with. "*Expecto Patronum!*" His mother's image burst out of his wand, and it immediately swatted the dementor's hand off Tom's shoulder. Looking furious, it shooed the dementors away, off into the darkness. That done with, the Patronus smiled at Tom and disappeared.

"Tom! TOM!"

Tom turned around to see Professor Xavier running toward him. He looked very distraught, and he had twigs in his hair. "We've been looking everywhere for you! We thought that little girl got you."

"Never mind that, what's going on?"

"Professor Dumbledore finished Grindelwald. He had to, or else the rat would have started killing students. Anyway, Grindelwald is dead, Tom, you don't need to worry about him anymore."

Tom sighed. "Good riddance, I say. What are we going to do about the girl?"

Professor Xavier noticed the prone girl on the ground, her dark gold hair spilling around her. He shot ropes at her from his wand, which bound her tightly. "This," he said, and he picked her up. "We'll take her back to the school. All the other supporters have been captured." They were now walking through the forest back to the school.

"And the dementors?"

"They left. I'll have to get Ogg to go and look for the three you took care of back there." He grinned suddenly. "Excellent Patronus, by the way."

Tom returned the grin. "Thank you."

When they reached the school, everything was in chaos. Students were running around, Headmaster Dippet was panicking, and a few teachers were nursing small injuries. Madam Viola was mending Professor Dumbledore's nose; it seemed to have been broken badly in two places. "It'll never look right again, to be sure," she said, "but it'll work."

Dumbledore, however, did not seem to care about the fact that his nose had gone from straight to extremely crooked. He looked stunned, and, to Tom's amazement, furious with himself. Professor Xavier led Tom over to where Dumbledore was sitting. "Hi," Tom said tentatively. Before Dumbledore could reply, someone rushed over. It was Headmaster Dippet.

"Mr. Riddle?" he croaked. "You--you showed incredible courage tonight. Incredible courage and talent beyond your years. I know nothing will really ever reward you properly, but how does a Medal of Magical Merit sound to you?"

"Are you serious, sir?"

"Of course I'm serious! You'll have your name up in the Trophy Room, my lad. Of course, it already is--the Honor Roll--but this will be all on its own. It's only a trifle of what you deserve, but I hope it will do. And I'll make it two hundred points to Slytherin."

"Two--two hundred points? I didn't do anything, I just fell over a few times and turned into a cat! That's nothing!" Dippet, however, would have none of that. He waved away the comment and turned to Dumbledore.

"I'm sending a letter to the Minister of Magic," said Dippet. "He'll want to reward you, to be sure."

Professor Dumbledore seemed to be in shock. "I can't believe it," he kept murmuring. "I can't believe it, I actually--" He broke off, looking very ill. He looked up at Dippet. "I've never killed anyone before," Dumbledore said quietly. "When I was an Auror, I never killed anybody, and now I've..."

"Oh..." Dippet clearly felt awkward. "Well, good luck with that," he added lamely. "Mr. Riddle, you should have Madam Viola check up on you. The Cruciatius Curse can cause considerable damage to the flesh."

Only now did Tom truly notice the aching sensation all through his body, and the fact that his arms and legs seemed to be bruised. Hearing this, Madam Viola (having finished with Dumbledore) bustled up to Tom and gave him the once-over. "I'd say a night in the hospital wing and a few pain-relieving potions," she said. "Come on, lad, let's go." Tom followed her up to the castle, looking over his shoulder at Professor Dumbledore. He had never seen him so shaken up before. Was it really that traumatizing to kill someone, even for a good cause? In any case, Tom hoped that things would finally settle down now, and that Dumbledore would go back to normal. However Tom disliked his teacher's rages, it scared him equally to see him weak.

As it happened, Professor Dumbledore was very slow to heal. He received the Order of Merlin, First Class, and a few other Ministry titles that clearly meant naught to him. Tom noticed he seemed rather more subdued than usual, and he would never talk about what had happened. Tom, meanwhile, felt quite befuddled. That incident in the earliest hour of the year stood out in his mind like a painting in angry, lurid colors. He would pass through the Trophy Room and stare at the little bronze medal, wondering what it had to do with the events that had transpired.

Another thing had been nagging at the back of Tom's mind for a long time. The centaur, Miravez, had said that he had both marks upon him, that he could be either a member of the Circle of Light or of the Circle of Darkness. Half of Tom's mind was horrified at the idea that he might be destined for evil, but the other half was no short of thrilled. Tom started having his nightmares on a nightly basis, and that nasty, nagging voice in the back of his mind seemed to be getting stronger. Twice during Easter break, he found himself crouched in the Restricted Section under the Invisibility Cloak in the dead of night, reading books he knew he should never even know existed.

Then again, his own ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, had studied the Dark Arts. He had not been a Dark wizard, though. Tom finally gave in, and decided that it was all right to study the Dark Arts as long as he did not use them on other people. By the start of the summer term, his excursions to the Restricted Section had become a nightly event. Tom kept them secret from Nepenthe, who he knew would have a fit if he found out, and Tom certainly did not want an angry cobra anywhere near him. When he was sure Nepenthe was not around, Tom would experiment with spells he had learned, usually on flobberworms he had borrowed from the Care of Magical Creatures teacher.

Perhaps his midnight readings had something to do with it, but Tom's Defense Against the Dark Arts grades suddenly skyrocketed. Professor Xavier, amazed at Tom's progress, was perpetually giving him advanced books to study. Tom appreciated this, as comparing these to the Dark Arts books was very interesting. He noticed that the books about defense tended to gravitate toward cruel magical creatures and the spells to ward them off, while the books teaching the Dark Arts tended to concentrate more on spells, curses, charms, and potions. Guilty though he was for engaging in forbidden activities, Tom did enjoy learning a whole new subject.

On the downside, Professor Dumbledore seemed to know that Tom was not the perfect student he appeared to be. Every time Tom turned up to breakfast looking drowsier than he ought to have, Professor Dumbledore would shoot him suspicious looks. It grew to be quite an annoyance to Tom, being constantly asked if he was all right, if he had slept properly. He knew that Dumbledore suspected him, and it made him feel both exasperated and furious with himself. Deep down, he knew that studying the Dark Arts, even without practicing them on humans, was still a bad thing, and he hoped against hope that Dumbledore never found out.

As it always must, summer came around, and with it, summer holidays, looming ever nearer. Tom breezed through the end-of-term exams and once again made top grades, the best in his year, as usual.

Before Tom knew it, his trunk was packed and he was waiting for the horseless carriages on the school steps, feeling even gloomier than he had the previous year because he knew what he was in for. The train ride to King's Cross was uneventful, and, as it was last year, Miss Dench was standing near the entrance, waiting primly. "I was wondering when you two would get here," she snapped. "Come on. We're already late for supper."

"Boo-hoo," Tom muttered sarcastically. Abby giggled.

When they arrived at the orphanage, Mr. Carney was there. He was waiting for Tom and Abby on the steps, arms folded and grimacing horribly. "Get your stuff inside," he barked. "I want a word with you two."

Tom's stomach took a dive. When Rupert Carney "wanted a word," it usually meant that he wanted to hurt the person he was addressing. Tom dragged his trunk up to his dormitory and hurried back down to the entryway to meet Abby, who looked confused and apprehensive. "Follow me to my office," he sneered, looking as though he was truly enjoying this. Abby and Tom followed, and so did Miss Dench. Mr. Carney threw open the double doors and entered his office, seating himself behind his desk. He had Tom and Abby sit down in chairs in front of his desk, and Miss Dench stood guard at the door. "So," Mr. Carney said, a nasty smile on his face. "So."

Abby looked rather green, and for once, Tom felt that they were on the same plane. They exchanged looks, then looked back at Mr. Carney. "So," Mr. Carney repeated. "Miss Dench tells me that you two are a witch and wizard."

Tom's jaw dropped. That perfidious old bat had ratted them out! He spun around in his seat and glared over at Miss Dench, who curled her lip as their eyes met. "What?!" Abby squeaked. "Th-th-th-tha-that's r-r-r-r-r-ridic-ridiculous!" Abby was stuttering so horribly that Tom could barely understand her.

"I have found significant evidence to the contrary," Mr. Carney scorned. He pulled out a Charms textbook. "I found this under your bed, Miss Forrey."

Abby blanched, and Tom's eyes flashed. Of course, it had been the Muggle-born to ruin everything. Mr. Carney was looking more murderous than ever. "I will not tolerate that dangerous nonsense under my roof," he continued, his eyes lingering on Tom. "Either you stop practicing it and cease attending that school of yours--in which case I'll have to stamp it out of you to make sure you never get involved again--or you insist on continuing with your studies and get thrown out of this orphanage."

"You can't do that!" Tom shouted. "That's like witch-burning or something! It's illegal!" He found himself on his feet.

"So?" Mr. Carney snarled. "That hardly matters to me. The fact is, you--you *freaks of nature*--are a danger to both the children and staff of this orphanage! If you want to keep your home here, boy, you'll keep your mouth shut and stop practicing your witchcraft. Oh, and that's a beating you've earned yourself for your cheek, Riddle."

Acting on instinct, Tom dashed for the door, pushing Miss Dench out of the way and exiting at breakneck speed. Without bothering to look behind him, Tom threw open the orphanage doors

and took the stairs four at a time. He heard shouting behind him, but did not stop to watch. He kept running, racing along the sidewalk. Twice he forgot to look both ways when he crossed the street, and cars screeched to a halt as they missed him by inches.

Finally, Tom stopped in a blocked-off alley, unable to run any farther. Gasping for air and clutching a stitch in his side, he slumped against the brick wall, brushing his hair out of his eyes. He could hardly believe what had just transpired. Mr. Carney had as good as thrown him out of the orphanage just for being magical. He had known Muggles were usually unsavory, but to be prejudiced against someone for simply being a wizard was too much. It was too unkind. Too much like his father.

"We don't need them," Tom thought. Those horrible, lesser beings scrambling across the earth, making life harder for wizards. He had met hundreds Muggles, and none of them had been nice. None of them. It was at that moment that Tom decided that he never wanted to see another Muggle as long as he lived. He wished they would be wiped off the face of the earth to save him the trouble of dealing with them.

Tom could see that dusk was quickly falling, and the rashness of his action suddenly hit him. He was lost in Whitechapel, a borough of London with a history of gruesome murders, and he was completely without any magical assistance--well, nothing but his wand, but that was no good if someone sneaked up on him. Just as he was wondering if Mr. Carney was still looking for him, a dark shape appeared at the other end of the alley.

"There you are, Riddle," Mr. Carney growled. Before Tom could react, the man had seized his arm. "Maybe you want a beating like the one you had a couple of years ago?" There was a maniacal smile on his face. "I could give you something a hundred times worse and leave you to die here. Nobody would care, Riddle."

"Stay away from me," Tom said through clenched teeth. Mr. Carney laughed and withdrew a belt from his jacket. As he tried to bring it down, it suddenly and magically skidded to a halt in midair, then crumbling into pieces. Tom breathed a sigh of relief, and he suddenly realized something. He was not at home, so he could perform as much magic as he wanted, and the Ministry would never know. Making up his mind, Tom wrenched his arm out of Mr. Carney's hand. The orphanage headmaster looked stricken and kept looking from the ruined belt to Tom. Eyes gleaming a brilliant red, Tom drew his wand out of his pocket and performed the first curse that came to his head. "*Crucio!*" he cried, his voice echoing around the deserted alleyway.

Mr. Carney fell to the pavement, shrieking and spluttering. He was shuddering and twitching in a dreadful way, and Tom watched, his emotions torn in two. Part of him was screaming at him to stop, while the other half was immensely enjoying it. The latter half won over, and Tom did not lift the curse for a good five minutes. Finally, he let his arm fall, glaring down at Mr. Carney. "Oh, I would like you to remember that," he spat, the twisted smile back on his face. "I'd like it to haunt you, to torment you, just like all of your beatings do for me. But I can't let you get me in trouble, now, can I? *Obliviate.*" Tom performed a strong enough memory charm to make Mr. Carney forget both the Cruciatus Curse and the fact that Tom and Abby were a witch and wizard. Before the man could see him, Tom dashed out of the alley and retraced his steps back to the orphanage.

He saw Miss Dench in the office window. Tom waved at her, and she fell for it, coming out of the orphanage. She came to the sidewalk where Tom was standing. "Come back, have you?" she snapped.

"Yes. *Obliviate*." With a flash, Miss Dench completely forgot her discovery about Abby and Tom. She looked slightly dazed, but Tom brushed past her and made for the office.

Something in Tom had made a decision. He found the office empty (apparently Abby was in her room) which was to his advantage. Tom strode over to Mr. Carney's file cabinet and jerked open the drawer marked "P - S." He shuffled through the folders until he found the one labeled, "Riddle, Tom M.," which he tugged out. After flipping around a while, he unearthed the right page.

PARENTS

Mother--Deceased as of Dec. 12, 1931

Place of residence: N/A

Father--Living but unwilling to make contact.

Place of residence: 163 Maple St., Little Hangleton.

Tom snatched a scrap of paper and scribbled down his father's address, his heart thumping in his ears. That done, Tom replaced everything carefully so that it would not look like he had been in there, then heading up the staircase to his bedroom. He changed into some clothes that were normal as opposed to his orphanage uniform. Blending in would be important if he was to succeed. He threw on a black overcoat on top of his already rather dark outfit, pocketed his wand and the address, and hid his Invisibility Cloak in the large inside pocket of his coat, just in case. Tom knew that he was very good at sneaking around, but one could never be too careful.

With that, Tom strode down the stairs. He stopped into Mr. Carney's office again, borrowing about fifty pounds and a few spare pence. Tom pilfered a little food from the kitchens, tucked it into his pocket, and sneaked out the front doors. He kept to the shadows, hoping that nobody would see him. After plucking a rose from the orphanage garden, Tom walked a few blocks to the Whitechapel cemetery, looking around for the familiar headstone. Finally, he spotted it. Tom knelt before it, and, for the first time in his life, prayed in earnest.

"Mum," he said softly. "Mum, I want you to please forgive me for what I am about to do. Don't be angry with me, please. I know you loved Father, but I can see him without the obstruction of love in my eyes. I see him in a true light; he hurt you horribly, Mum, and I am going to get him back. I am going to get him back for doing to you what Mr. Carney just tried to do to me. I hope you understand, Mum. Please understand." Tom laid the rose across the grave, biting his lip.
"Well, goodbye, then." Tom got to his feet and waited on the corner. A carriage finally came by, and Tom hailed it. The driver smiled jovially at him.

"Where to, lad?" he asked.

"King's Cross Station," Tom replied immediately.

"All right," the driver smiled. He prompted the horse and they started off. By the time they reached King's Cross, it was pitch-black outside. Tom thanked the driver and paid him before walking into the station. He felt strangely resigned, as though the half of him that usually fought this sort of thing had given up on this issue.

Tom hurried up to the ticket window and took out the remaining money. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

"Yes?" the woman asked.

"When's the next train to Little Hangleton?"

The woman was silent for a moment. "We don't have any trains to Little Hangleton," she said. "However, we do have an overnighter to Greater Hangleton at ten o'clock--that's in a half-hour. Little Hangleton's a short distance from there."

"That will do," Tom said quietly. "How much for a ticket to the next train?"

"Five pounds, fifty," the ticket-holder replied. Tom counted out the money and handed it to her, and she gave him a ticket. "That's on Platform Six, sweetie," she added, seeing Tom look over his shoulder uncertainly.

"Right. Thanks." Tom made his way over to the platform and climbed the stairs into a train car. It was really just like going to Hogwarts, except in the dead of night. He selected a compartment and sat by the window, staring up at the full moon in the clear night sky. The train started up shortly afterward, and it appeared Tom was one of the few people taking it. When the ticket collector came by, Tom handed him the ticket, then resumed his surveillance of the sky. After a while, he fell asleep on his seat, for once not dreaming. This was a good thing, for Tom truly did not want to think about what he was about to do.

16. Little Hangleton

Fern Whitaker rubbed off a spot on the bar counter, listening to the gossip idly. She had been working at the Little Hangleton pub, the Hanged Man, for about a year now, and she decided that though it was a tough job, she would take it over an office job any day. The bell above the door rang as yet another person entered, and Fern prepared to take an order. The person who entered was taller than her by far, but he looked young, maybe sixteen at the oldest. He had blue-black hair that hung in his bright turquoise eyes and a very handsome face. He was wearing a longish black overcoat over a dark green sweater and black slacks, and Fern thought he looked slightly nervous. Fern watched with interest as he took a seat at the very end of the counter, looking around.

"Can I get you something?" Fern asked, ambling over. Strangers were rare in Little Hangleton, and the nineteen-year-old was, naturally, curious.

The stranger looked startled at being addressed directly, but he recovered himself quickly. "Yes. May I please have a strawberry soda?"

"Sure," Fern replied. As she retreated into the kitchen to prepare the drink, she noticed that the boy was studying a crumpled bit of paper. After five minutes, she returned. "Here you are," she said kindly.

"Thank you." The stranger took a sip of the soda, but seemed far more interested in listening to the conversations than anything else. Fern, however, did not have any more customers to tend, so she decided to interrogate the newcomer.

"I haven't seen you around here before."

"Hmm? Oh. I'm visiting somebody," the boy said. His voice was soft and straightforward, and it had mostly a Londoner's accent with a little Irish mixed in. Fern deduced that he must have been raised in London, but had, perhaps, spent a lot of time in the company of an Irish person or two. (Though Fern did not know it, she was dead right. Hannah Hiddy had been Irish.)

"What's your name?" Fern asked.

"Tom R--Tom," the stranger said automatically. He seemed about to say more, but decided against it, biting his lip. He gave a small smile. "I'm here visiting the Riddles," he added casually. "Thomas Riddle is my uncle by marriage. I've never met him."

Fern's face fell. She immediately felt sorry for Tom for having to visit relatives like that. She had run into the Riddle patriarch, Llewellyn, on more than one occasion, and did not like him at all. He had seemed rather stuck-up, and made a point of buying the only real car in Little Hangleton, a black Mercedes, in an attempt to show how rich he was. "That's nice," she said. "My name's Fern, by the way. Fern Whitaker."

"It's a pleasure," Tom replied, his eyes glinting strangely. He held out a hand and Fern shook it, noticing that his fingers were almost unnaturally long, and very thin, like everything else about him. "So... what can you tell me about the Riddles?" he asked.

Fern's eyes lit up. She loved spreading rumors, and here was someone who knew absolutely nothing about the Riddles, who had trillions of rumors flying around them. "Well, old Llewellyn Riddle's a bit of a coot." That was the understatement of the year, she thought. "Really rich, really

pompous. His wife, Olivia, now she's an interesting one. Used to be a beauty, but mean as hell now she's lost her looks. Why, I've heard that she--"

"No offense, Miss Whitaker, but may I ask for solid, verifiable facts instead of town rumors?" Tom asked rather coldly. Fern felt slightly taken aback. Usually people loved to hear her rumors.

"Well... okay..." Fern thought awhile. "Well, old Mr. Riddle is quite the snob, if I do say so myself. Loves to flaunt his wealth." Tom seemed aghast at the idea. "And I know for a fact that the Missus fires a servant a week, two if she's feeling particularly snarly."

Tom looked strangely relieved. "And Thomas?"

She hesitated. "Oh, well, I'm not sure if this is true, but it probably is. Thomas Riddle got married about sixteen years back. Moved to London, the whole shebang. They say his wife was a real knockout. Absolutely beautiful." She noticed that Tom looked slightly tenser than before when he heard this statement. "Everyone heard about it when he sent a letter back home saying his wife was expecting. Anyway, about a half-year later, he came back to live with his parents. No wife, no baby. Told us all they'd died in a car crash." Fern leaned in conspiratorially. "That was codswallop. Mary Beaker found a letter that had blown out of their garbage can. It was from this hospital in London, asking Thomas Riddle to come and take his baby. Apparently, his wife died when the baby was born. But he didn't do it. No one knows why he was suddenly so put off by his baby--I mean, he was really excited about it before. And that means he must have ditched his wife, too. Doesn't make any sense to me."

"What's he like now?" Tom demanded. There was a definite gleam in his eyes, one that looked almost red.

"Bitter," Fern sighed. "He's never been the same since that whole thing with his wife. Didn't used to be so bad, apparently, but he went all sour. He never leaves the house, and he ignores all visitors." She bit her lip. "Sorry... guess I haven't warmed you up to the man any, eh? Maybe he's better with relatives. Blood is thicker than water."

Tom laughed at this statement, and Fern shuddered. His laugh was icy, cynical, and rather high. "That is not always true. Well, I'd best be going."

"So soon? Oh well... Bye, Tom. Come by again sometime."

"I might," Tom said cryptically. "Oh, one more thing."

"What's that?"

Tom looked around to make sure nobody was looking, then drew what looked like a rod-straight yew branch out of his inside coat pocket. Pointing it at Fern, he said, "*Obliviate*," and she completely forgot ever having seen him.

Tom pocketed his wand, placed ten pence upon the counter, and strode out of the pub. The bartender--Fern or whatever her name was--had given him all the information he wanted. If his relatives really were as awful as Fern made them out, he would hopefully have no problem with guilt. Now all he had to do was find the house.

Trying to look like a local, Tom wandered down Maple Street, looking at all of the houses. It took him very little time to find the right one; indeed, it was hard to miss. His father and his family must be rich, quite rich, for their house was a mansion in every respect. Tom narrowed his

eyes and tried to get a closer look. It seemed that servants were swarming around the place, and the gardens were magnificent. His curiosity got the better of him, and he crossed the street to get closer. He halted at the gate, gazing up at it. "A shame, really," Tom thought. "Under different circumstances, I might have liked to live here."

"What're you doing here?" a voice suddenly asked. Tom tore his eyes away from the manor to see a man hobbling toward him across the lawn. He was only about thirty years of age, but he had a cane in his hands.

"Just looking," Tom said quickly, giving the man a fake smile.

The man scoffed. "You aren't supposed to be here. Go back where you came from, boy."

"Make me," Tom said softly, the smile leaving his face.

"Listen, laddie, I've faced Nazis, and I damn near lost my leg to them. I'm not about to be afraid of a kid not out of grammar school. Now, clear out."

"It isn't against the law to look at a house, last I checked," Tom said smoothly, his eyes blazing.

"GO!" the man barked. Tom rolled his eyes and strode away. He had a sudden idea. If he turned into a cat, he could explore without getting funny looks. Tom came to a shady, deserted avenue. Making sure nobody was looking, he transformed, then retraced his steps back to the manor. The man was now planting a few flowers in the garden. Tom supposed he must be the Riddles' gardener. Resisting the urge to go scratch him, Tom wandered up the winding drive to the veranda. Two maids were hanging out laundry nearby, and the cook was outside, instructing three assistants on what to buy at the market. Tom wondered what anyone could do with so many servants.

He spent the rest of the day wandering around the grounds to his grandparents' estate, waiting for the servants to go home, or to retreat to their own quarters. Finally, around dinnertime, the place seemed devoid of all life except in what looked like the dining room. It seemed all the servants had gone. Tom scurried up to the veranda and turned back into a human, drawing out his wand. "*Alohomora*," Tom whispered, tapping the doorknob with his wand. The door swung open, and Tom closed it behind him by magic. He knew that leaving fingerprints on anything would get the Muggle police involved, which was the last thing he wanted. Besides, every last one of his fingerprints were accidentals, which meant that it would be even easier for the police to catch him.

The place was beautiful on the inside, with high ceilings and luxurious carpets. Muffled voices came from a room a ways away, but other than that, the place was silent. Tom crept, still very much like a cat, along the corridor toward the voices.

"...Ella, now there's one I wouldn't mind sacking. She's not punctual enough." This voice was high and shrill.

"Mother, honestly, why is it that you insist upon firing so many good people? Ella's fine," came a second voice. It was much deeper, and Tom's heart gave a jolt as he realized it was his father's. There he was, mere meters away, the person who had created him. Tom was struck by a sudden idea, his cat instincts once again coming to effect. It would be fun to play with them a bit before striking. Patronuses, it hit him, looked very much like ghosts...

"Leave your mother to her own devices," the third voice barked.

"Not that it matters to me if Ella leaves," Tom's father added hastily. "Come to think of it, she is a bit of a--"

"*Expecto Patronum*," Tom whispered, pointing his wand into the dining room. He peeked around the doorframe to see what would happen. As always, there was the ghostly figure of his mother, looking around for the dementors, confused. He heard three people stand up sharply.

"Good God! Is that--is that--" Olivia Riddle shrieked.

"Maria," Tom's father whispered. Tom heard (but could not see) him backing away and tripping over something. "What do you want from us? Go away!" he cried to the Patronus. The image of Tom's mother frowned.

"Run!" Llewellyn Riddle said. "Come on, the sitting room--" The Riddles clambered out of the dining room, and Tom heard them lock a door behind them. He let his Patronus die and entered the dining room. One door led to the kitchen, the other to the sitting room. Tom performed the Unlocking Charm again and threw the door open.

The room was pitch-black, but from the sound of the terrified cries, Tom's father and his parents were sitting in a corner nearby. "Who's there?" Olivia called. "Stay away from us, Thomas is the one you want!"

"MOTHER!"

Tom muttered a spell, and every lamp in the room blazed to life. For the first time in his life, he saw his family. His grandmother was rather bony with white hair, his grandfather was muscular and had a very jowly face, and his father... Tom had nothing in common with his father. Thomas Riddle had straw-colored hair and grey eyes. He was tall, but not exceptionally, and he had a medium build instead of a slight one. Right now he was sheet-white with fear. "Hello, Father," Tom said stiffly.

"Oh my God..." Thomas went even paler.

"What kind of nonsense is this?" Llewellyn demanded.

Tom turned his eyes to his grandfather, and they were starting to look a little red. "I'm sure you already know," Tom spat. "My name is Tom Marvolo Riddle, the son of Maria Katya Salamair and--alas--Thomas Wills Riddle." He riveted his eyes on his father again, and they suddenly turned a more brilliant red than ever before. "You abandoned me," Tom said, his voice dangerously soft. "You left my mother to die and refused to accept responsibility for me. You knew that would catch up with you, though, didn't you?"

"It wasn't my fault," Thomas snapped. "She was one of those--one of those--creatures! She was barely human! And you... you are the same, aren't you?"

"Very much so," Tom whispered. "Unfortunately for you." He took a step closer, and the Riddles were practically crunched into their corner. "Do you have any idea the kind of hell you put me through?" Tom hissed. "You left me in a world without a family, where they would torment me, starve me... it's a miracle I'm alive today. And my mother--you killed her, Father. Mum is dead because she missed you so badly. She grew so depressed that her health failed her." Tom's lips suddenly curved into that twisted smile. "But now, Father, I can fight back. I'm not a shy little boy anymore, I'm a wizard. And I do not appreciate what you did to me, not at all."

Thomas Riddle now did something which clearly cost him every ounce of resolution he had. He took four steps forward and held out his hands, looking scared out of his wits. "Tom... she named you after me, didn't she?... I... I'm sorry--"

"Malarkey," Tom scoffed, his eyes glowing. "Pure balderdash. You aren't sorry. You're afraid. Afraid of your own flesh and blood, Father. How... *intrepid* of you..." Tom waved his wand almost lazily, and his father flew to the side of the room, leaving Mr. and Mrs. Riddle out in the open. Tom whirled on his father again. "I want you to experience the sort of pain I went through," Tom said, his voice still so soft that it was barely audible, but the others were hanging onto his every word. "Let's do it in chronological order, shall we?" Tom's merciful half was sobbing miserably, but the other half's cackling was drowning it out. "First... let's see... I lost my mother."

Realizing what was about to happen, Olivia Riddle made a break for it. Tom got there first. "*Avada Kedavra!*" he shouted. Olivia froze, her knees buckling. Tom bit his lip and turned away, trying to concentrate on the task at hand so that he would not have to comprehend what he had done. His eyes, now glowing so brightly they seemed to give off a light of their own, flicked back over to his father. "After that, I was abandoned by my own father, and it was almost as though you were dead. 'Almost,' needless to say, is enough for me."

"What?!" Llewellyn was in a panic. "No--please, I--"

"*Avada Kedavra,*" Tom repeated, and Llewellyn halted mid-sentence. Tom turned his burning eyes back to Thomas Riddle, whose face was blank with disbelief. "You can see my situation, Father," said Tom in a would-be casual voice, though he faltered slightly. "Alone in the world, left in the care of people who could give a damn if I lived or died. It couldn't get any worse, could it?" Tom had that evil smile on his face once more. "You know, I was beaten, Father." An odd shudder passed over his face, and he stopped smiling abruptly. "I'm sure you don't want to see the scars. I am the only living person who has ever seen them, and considering that you just ate dinner..." He trailed off. For an instant, all the evil left his eyes, and he looked just as vulnerable and lost as ever he had. He recovered himself quickly.

"It's all your fault, Father, that I even have these scars. If you had taken me in, or if you had overlooked Mum's talents, then my life would not have been miserable."

"No good ever comes of that magic nonsense!" Thomas squeaked. He was sitting on the floor, knees drawn up to his chest like a little boy.

Tom ignored this. He raised his wand again. "I want you to relive every second of the agony I was put through, Father. I want you to feel the pain I have felt, to suffer as I have. And then, Father, only then will you truly understand what you have done." Tom hesitated, chose to ignore the pleading voice in his head, then acted. "*Crucio.*"

The screams of pain that filled the room were so noisy that Tom immediately performed a Blanketing Charm, lest someone in a nearby house hear them. He watched for what felt like hours, boiling hate rising in his throat. Finally, Tom removed the curse, though reluctantly. His father, panting and gasping, sprawled on the ground. "Tom," he rasped. "Tom, please--"

The hate in Tom's mind had risen to a fever pitch. He never wanted to hear the name Tom again, for everything belonging to the treacherous Muggle must be abandoned. "I'm not Tom anymore," he hissed. "I am Lord Voldemort, soon to be the greatest sorcerer the world has ever seen. You and your whole bloody race can burn in Hell for all I care, you hear me?"

"I'm sorry!" Thomas Riddle wailed, and Tom could tell, deep down, that he truly meant it. He had scrambled to his knees. "Please, Tom, I'm sorry! I'll do anything!"

This time, both sides of Tom's brain agreed on his next action. One thought it would be the merciful thing to do, the other thought he had finally given his father what he deserved. "*Avada Kedavra*," Tom whispered, his eyes like orange-red coals flaming in their sockets. Thomas collapsed, and Tom did, too. He had burst into hysterical tears, and was sobbing into his arms. "Dear God," Tom murmured. "Oh, Mummy, Mummy, what have I done?"

Tom's eyes, though very shiny with tears, had returned to their usual color, and his face was deathly pale. The cruel creature he had briefly become was now gone, and Tom suddenly completely realized what had transpired over the past twenty-four hours. He had performed two of the Unforgivable Curses repeatedly, had run away from home, had broken every major wizarding law in the book... and he was a murderer. A murderer, at the age of thirteen. Three people were dead at his hand, and, Muggles or no, Tom almost wished he had not done it. He looked down at his hand, which still had the wand clenched in it. The hand--and the wand--that had killed these people. How could he go on with life as usual, knowing that he was responsible for the deaths of three fellow humans?

Without really noticing what he was doing, Tom left the house once and for all. He made sure everything was as it should be, and locked the door magically behind him. Stepping out onto the porch, he shivered in the night air. This was not out of cold--on the contrary, the night was quite warm--but out of disbelief, out of misery. He struggled to remember the proper name for his crime. Patricide, was it? What an ugly word. Ugly word, ugly crime, he thought bitterly. He ran off the porch at top speed, his long black coat flying out behind him.

17. Manuscripts and Ceramists' Wheels

Tom sighed and rested his forehead against the cool windowpane. He was aboard the Hogwarts Express on the first of September, feeling relieved that he was finally returning to school. Milling around home for the summer had been both dull and horrible, for when he was not staring off into space, he was haunted by memories of the horrible things that had happened--that he had done.

The last two months had been a blur to him. He had taken another overnight train back to London and returned to the orphanage. His memory charms had still been befuddling the two staff members, and they had not even noticed his absence. Abby kept trying to corner him and demand what had happened, but Tom, remembering with a little disgust that she had tried to ask him to the Halloween Dance the previous year, had always shaken her off. He had spent every day locked in his room, pacing. Nepenthe had seemed to know that Tom was in no mood to chat, so he had avoided his master unless he was called.

Meanwhile, Tom's mind had been in a turmoil. He still could not believe that he had killed three people. After thinking about it awhile, though, a little of the remorse vanished. They had been Muggles, and treacherous Muggles, at that. From the sound of it, if Tom had not done it, someone else would have. The Riddles had been quite unpopular, and more than a few people would have wanted to get at their money. As Tom had started to see it, no Muggle deserved to live. No, Tom had grown to be worried about something else on top of it. He hoped nobody at the Ministry heard about the Riddles' deaths, or else he or she might smell a rat, and the person would ask the Ministry to investigate. Not that anyone would suspect a thirteen-year-old boy, but the idea of being caught had scared him, and it still did.

Tom shuddered and looked down at the book in his arms. *Hogwarts, A History*, which he had still not managed to finish. He flipped through the pages until he came to the one he had marked and started reading again. Tom quickly deduced that his mind was too full to take in any more at the moment. Making a sound of exasperation, he slammed the book shut and glared out the window. "Murderers don't deserve to read," someone inside him snapped. Tom had a sudden and grimly amusing vision of himself with a miniature person on each shoulder. One was someone in white robes and angel wings, and the other was an evil little person wearing red robes, a tail, and horns. Right now, it was his better conscience who was talking. The two little voices had been arguing in his head ever since he had returned from Little Hangleton, and he had been having worse nightmares than he had ever had before.

Brushing his bangs out of his eyes, Tom drew in a breath and exhaled slowly. He could not get it out of his head; their eyes... the fear that was in their eyes... Naturally, the nasty half of him had found their submissive terror enjoyable, but the other half could not shake the thought of it. "Stop thinking about it, you great stupid prat!" he commanded himself. The image simply grew more vivid than ever. "Bloody Hell," he muttered. "Father, leave me alone..."

Tom shut his eyes against the images flashing before them, but they grew so lurid that he could see them through his eyelids. They had not deserved to die in that kind of fright... "Of course they did!" Tom thought furiously. "They were Muggles, all Muggles should die!" Tom's brain would not accept this, and the memory of the Riddles' dread-filled eyes continued to pummel him.

He was so distraught that he did not notice the first knock on the door to his empty compartment. The next knock, however, was louder and more persistent, and it jerked Tom from his daydreams. "Yes?" he called.

The door slid open, revealing the largest person Tom had ever seen in his life. Tom himself had grown considerably, but this person made him feel about the size of a Cornish pixie. He was at least eight feet tall, with a wild mane of black hair and a ruddy face. He looked young, though, only about eleven. "Don' mind if I sit in here, do yeh?" he asked tentatively. "Ev'ry other booth's full to burstin'."

"Certainly," Tom replied quietly. His voice had become distinctly muted since the incident, and he rarely raised it above a lilt. He had become far more introverted, and hated to speak to anyone.

The huge boy smiled nervously and sat down across from Tom. "Yeh in yer sixth year?" the boy asked.

"Third, actually," Tom responded softly, examining the cover of his book. "I presume you are starting this year?"

"Yeah. I can' wait!" the boy grinned. "Me name's Rubeus Hagrid, by the by. Yeh can call me Rubeus, but if I catch yeh callin' me Ruby, ye'll be in fer trouble." He laughed heartily. "What's yer name, anyway?"

"Tom. Tom Marvolo Riddle." Tom held out his hand, and Rubeus shook his whole forearm.

"Which House?"

"Slytherin," Tom said, watching the color drain a little from Rubeus's face. "We aren't really as evil as everyone says, though," he added casually. "Well, most of us aren't. Watch out for Francis Malfoy and his goons, though. Then again, you probably wouldn't have many problems with them."

Rubeus laughed again. "No, bullies never did start with me." He hesitated. "Wan' ter play Explodin' Snap?"

"I've never been one for cards," Tom apologized. "Do you have a chess set?"

"Only a Muggle 'un."

"That will do," Tom said, conjuring a chess table. Rubeus stared, impressed, and took a box out of his pocket. Inside were two sets of Muggle chessmen, carved nicely out of two different kinds of wood. Tom, as always, took the darker pieces and set them up, while Rubeus did the same with the pale tan ones. As they played, Tom's mind was on completely different things. He wondered if the Ministry paid any attention to Muggle deaths. Perhaps they did not, but the way Tom's luck was going, they did. Professor Dumbledore--Tom's face went white. If Professor Dumbledore found out, he would be in for it. Tom was brilliant at lying to most people, but when he lied to Dumbledore, he always got the impression that the Transfiguration teacher saw right through him.

"Checkmate," Tom said, a note of triumph in his voice, as he cornered Rubeus's king.

"Yeh're good!" Rubeus said, impressed. "Great strategist, I'll give yeh that. Play again?"

"Well, I--oh, what the hell." Tom waved his wand and the pieces rearranged themselves. As they played, Tom and Rubeus exchanged life stories. From what he could gather, Rubeus's life had been similar to his, up to a point. Rubeus's mother had abandoned him and his father when Rubeus was three years of age, leaving his father to raise him. When asked to recount his own tale, Tom edited it a bit. He pretended that his father had died in a car crash after leaving his

mother, and that his life at the orphanage had been much less violent than it actually had been. After Tom had beaten Rubeus at chess a total of fifteen times, the lunch cart turned up. They chatted over lunch, and by the time they got off on the platform at Hogsmeade Station, they had become friends.

"Okay, that's Professor Dumbledore over there, the tall fellow with the auburn hair. He'll take you up to the castle. I have to go meet my friends now," Tom said to Rubeus. "See you at the Sorting."

"Bye," Rubeus called, striding over to Dumbledore. The other first-years gave him amazed looks. Tom made sure his friend met up with Dumbledore, then hurried off to find the other third-years.

Tom found Larkin, Zuhayr, and Adrian almost immediately, talking with an older boy. The boy's eyes were warm brown behind rather thick glasses, and his hair was dark brown and extremely messy. Tom knew him by sight, but had never spoken to him. "Good evening," Tom said. All four of them jumped and spun around, their eyes wide. None of them had heard or seen him coming.

"Hi," Larkin said, recovering before the others. "Hey, Tom--" She paused, as Tom flinched slightly. Hearing his father's name was jarring. "Tom, this is Nathan Potter. Nathan, Tom Riddle."

Nathan smiled broadly and held out his hand. A gleaming prefect badge shone on his chest. "Hey, Tommy," he said.

Tom gingerly shook the other's hand. "I prefer Tom," he said through clenched teeth. "Or Voldemort," he added to himself.

"Oh. Okay." Nathan looked a little awkward. "Well, um, yeah."

Tom gave him a withering look and was about to ask if that was the most intelligent thing he could think to say, but he decided against it. "Which House are you?" he asked instead.

"Hufflepuff," Nathan said. "Well, I have to run. See you lot at the Sorting, then." He dashed off to meet up with some of his other friends.

His friends waved goodbye after Nathan, then clambered into a four-person carriage. Before Tom could get in, his friends made space for a Gryffindor sixth-year. "What about me?" Tom demanded hotly.

"Oops," Larkin said. "You can sit on my lap, Tom." Adrian and Zuhayr roared with laughter, and the Gryffindor started snickering uncontrollably.

"As much as I appreciate it, I'll decline the offer," Tom said dryly. "I'll go get a carriage on my own." Feeling furious, he spun on his heel and stormed away. "Typical," he muttered. Normally, he would have been just a little angry about this, but his temper had got exponentially shorter over the summer.

Tom picked out an empty carriage and stepped into it, flopping irritably into the corner. Three other people turned up almost immediately. One of them was perfectly welcome. Lili Po showed up and sat next to him, grinning. She was closely followed by two people Tom was less inclined to welcome. There was Nathan Potter, the Hufflepuff, along with none other than Philip Cedric. Once they were all seated, the carriage started up. "I can't wait for the Sorting!" Nathan kept saying. "My little cousin's here this year, she made it in. She's not all Muggle after all..."

Upon returning to the castle, the four of them headed into the Great Hall and took their seats at the House tables. Tom watched the terrified first-years troop in minutes later, Rubeus four heads taller than most of them. After a few names, Rubeus was Sorted into Gryffindor. About twelve more names, then--

"Potter, Myrtle!" Professor Dumbledore shouted, starting to sound a little hoarse by now. A girl with Nathan Potter's dark mouse-brown hair, thick glasses, and brown eyes stepped forward and sat down on the stool. Her hair was rather yarnlike, and she looked horribly nervous. She looked more like Nathan's sister than just his cousin. Her Sorting took nearly a minute, but she was finally named a Hufflepuff, and she hurried over to sit with Nathan. Tom thought she looked like a very depressing sort of person.

After the feast, Tom headed up the stairs to the Slytherin common room. Not feeling much like sleeping, he headed up to his dormitory, hunted around in his trunk for his book, and trudged back down to the common room, intent on a fire-lit reading session. He was the only one who decided to stay up, but seeing as he was used to being up past four in the morning, this was not a problem. He sank into an armchair, accidentally opening the book to a later page. However, the words at the top of the entry caught his eye. "*Salazar Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets.*"

"This could be interesting," Tom said to himself, and he read the passage, which was short and rather sketchy.

Salazar Slytherin allegedly built the Chamber of Secrets late in his life. He was a supporter of the so-called "purity of blood," and did not think Muggle-borns trustworthy. Slytherin was supposed to have captured a monster and kept it in the Chamber, and he warned that one day, his true Heir would arrive at Hogwarts. This Heir alone could control the horrors within the Chamber; indeed, the Heir alone could open the Chamber in the first place. Slytherin said that his Heir would cleanse the school of Muggle-born students and prevent more from coming. Slytherin's warning does not extend to half-bloods, however. This story is widely believed to be pure mythology, perhaps a legend created over time from a series of rumors.

Tom was immediately intrigued. He decided that no matter what, he would find out more about the Chamber of Secrets. He was not sure why the idea attracted him so. Perhaps it was simply the fact that it involved punishing Muggles. Tom did not necessarily hate all of the Muggle-born students (though he had yet to meet one who wasn't annoying), but he hated their parents, and as far as he could see, if he was harmful to Muggle-borns, he was penalizing their Muggle families. Making Muggles miserable was precisely what he wanted to do.

Tom arrived at breakfast the next morning looking extremely tired. He had been up all night, searching all of the books in the common room in an attempt to find out more about the Chamber. It was to no avail; none of the books seemed to have any real information. Rubeus grinned at him from across the Hall. Tom smiled wearily in response and flopped into a seat next to someone who had his back to him. As he sat down, the other person spun around, and Tom realized it was Francis Malfoy. "I don't want to eat near a Mudblood," he sneered. "Go away."

"I'm a HALF-BLOOD!" Tom hissed, his eyes flashing. Francis laughed coldly.

"Whatever. Just move away, your Muggle fumes are curdling the milk."

Tom glared at him and moved down a few spaces. The cat in him was thinking how very fun it would be to scratch Francis across the face, while the human was thinking more along the lines of the Pertussis Curse. He ate alone as his friends had already finished, then headed off to his

first class. Along with his regular classes, today he had all three of his elective classes; Arithmancy, Study of Ancient Runes, and Divination. Arithmancy came first.

It took only one lesson for Tom to decide that he loved Arithmancy. It was immensely challenging, rather like Muggle physics but twelve times harder, and with magical laws entwined. Study of Ancient Runes proved to be just as wonderful, if not more. It dealt with the properties of Latin, Greek, Chinese, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian words and phrases when used as spells. By graduation, Tom would know how to make up his own spells. The class also involved the reading of Druid symbols and how these symbols could be used for magical purposes.

By four o'clock, when he would have his Divination lesson, Tom was feeling rather cheerful for the first time in months. When he was studying, he did not have to think about anything else, and the classes were fascinating. Tom expected Divination to be just as interesting. His Divination class consisted of Slytherins and Ravenclaws. Lili was there, but on the downside, so was Francis. It was held in a beautiful tower room, with squashy armchairs around circular tables and zodiac charts hanging on the walls. Tom sat at a table with Lili Po and Electra Andes, a Slytherin girl Tom did not know very well. Sven Kristiansen, a Ravenclaw boy, took the fourth seat.

Just as the bell rang, the instructor bustled in. She had wavy brown hair long enough for her to sit on, and her eyes were dark blue. A patterned scarf was bound around her neck and she wore gold hoop earrings, but aside from that, she looked fairly normal. "Good afternoon," she said. "I apologize for my lack of punctuality, but I had to attend to a few matters in the dungeons. Right-o. My name's Professor Camden, but you can call me Ariana. My first name, you know; I think it's healthy for students and teachers to be on a first-name basis... First order of business. Today we're going to start with tea leaf interpretations."

Professor Camden explained the basics of tea leaves, then handed out teacups and poured out tea for everyone. She seemed to have boundless energy, and was extremely excited to see what would happen. Tom swirled the tea leaves as he was instructed and looked down into the cup curiously. At first, all he saw was a bunch of soggy bits of leaf. He narrowed his eyes and gazed at it, almost looking past it.

Immediately and amazingly, the shapes seemed to spring to life. There was a bird that looked like a hawk, a man at a ceramist's wheel, a crescent moon, a cross, and a dagger. The shapes seemed very sharp around the edges, and Tom could see them perfectly clearly. "Anyone seen anything yet?" asked Professor Camden. Blinking a few times, Tom raised his hand. Though the teacher had her back to him, she knew that he had raised his hand, and in an instant, she was standing next to him. "What do you see?" she asked.

"Well, there's a cross, a crucifix."

"Hmm... that means 'trials and difficulties.' Go on."

"And there's a dagger right under it, see?"

Professor Camden went slightly green. "Oh... are you a fiery sort of person, Tom? Yes, Albus and Trahern have both told me you are. This means, most likely, that you are going to solve your difficulty with an act of violence."

"Do these cups show the past, too?" Tom asked quizzically.

"They can. Why, has something like that happened in your past?"

"On several occasions," Tom said quietly, not feeling much like relating these occurrences. "Let's see... a crescent moon."

"That one means you'll be reunited with an old friend," said Professor Camden. "There's more, isn't there?"

"Yes, two more... there's a falcon. It's sitting on this bloke's shoulder--or is it a part of him? I can't tell... anyway, the fellow's working a ceramist's wheel, and the falcon's stuck to his shoulder."

Professor Camden's face fell again. "Tom... the falcon means that you have a deadly enemy. Or that you will have one. You say he's sitting on a ceramist's shoulder?"

"Yes," Tom said slowly.

Electra burst into giggles. "Riddle, look behind you, your mortal enemy is going to stab you with a ceramic kitten!" Tom glowered at her.

"Don't say that!" Professor Camden squeaked. "Tom, what is the man making on the wheel?"

Tom narrowed his eyes again and gazed at the tea leaves. "It looks like a pot," he shrugged.

"Whatever you do, steer clear of someone who makes pottery and has something against you," the teacher warned. "It could be your end."

"He'll hang you with a clay rope," Electra whispered.

Tom forced himself to ignore this and watched as Professor Camden helped the other students. "Beware a ceramist," he said to himself. Never had he had such strange advice.

Tom walked slowly along a Hogwarts corridor, his black cloak swirling around him. As he stopped into an empty classroom, there it was again. The Specter. It smiled a lipless smile and beckoned him. "Come here, little one," it cooed almost fondly. "Do you want to see something?"

"No!" Tom said firmly.

The Specter laughed that awful laugh, then placed a hand on Tom's shoulder. "Follow me," it said. Tom had no choice but to obey, as the clawlike fingernails suddenly shot out like those of a cat, injecting themselves into his shoulder so forcefully and painfully that he almost screamed. The Specter laughed again and marched Tom into a back room, where there stood a mirror. Tom caught a glimpse of the reflection and felt promptly very ill. There was only one person in the reflection, but it was a bizarre person, vertically divided exactly down the middle. One half of it was Tom, bright-eyed and pale. The other half was the Specter.

"Look at him," said the Specter. "Poor, poor Tom. Torn in half."

"That isn't me," said Tom softly.

"It doesn't matter what you think. Right now, we have more important matters to attend." The Specter snapped his fingers, and the reflection melted away, revealing a swirling tunnel made entirely of mist. Smiling a demented smile, the Specter dragged Tom into the tunnel. There was a rushing sound, and Tom found himself in a room with white walls. It was completely bare, but Tom was in no condition to wonder about the lack of furnishing. The room was not empty--indeed, far from it.

There were prone figures all over the place, blood pooling around them, their eyes wide. There were some very small children, but it was mostly adults. Somewhere off in a corner was an old man who looked like an older version of the Riddles' gardener. The two nearest Tom were quite young. One was a man with messy black hair and grey eyes, the other, a beautiful woman, her dark red hair matted with blood and her brilliant green eyes wide and glassy. Tom tore away from the Specter, feeling his left shoulder being scratched open by the Specter's fingernails. He did not care. Tom knelt by the beautiful girl, staring at her blankly. Tom's eyes flashed and he rose to his feet, glaring at the Specter. "WHAT DID YOU DO TO THESE PEOPLE?" Tom demanded.

"Hmm? Oh, they're dead."

"That, I believe, is obvious," Tom said icily. He moved on to the next group of people and his heart skipped a beat. There lay his father, flanked by old Mr. and Mrs. Riddle.

"As are they," said the Specter casually. "I killed them."

"No you didn't," Tom said quietly. "I did."

"Did you, now?" the Specter remarked. "I think not. Tom was acting under my influence, not yours." It stepped forward and put a cold hand under Tom's chin. Tom suddenly felt that stabbing pain in his forehead, concentrated in an area shaped like a lightning bolt. The Specter laughed, then dug its fingernails into Tom's left shoulder again. "You are being an idiot," the Specter hissed. "Tom is not yours to control. You are too weak."

"I'M Tom!" Tom yelled. The Specter shook its head. "I am! I'm Tom! I'm Tom..."

"...Riddle," Tom said, sitting up in his bed. He looked around him and sighed with relief. It was only a nightmare... Shivering, Tom looked at his clock. Two in the morning. Sighing heavily, Tom started to lie back down, but he stopped, eyes wide with disbelief.

His shoulder was bleeding.

18. Of Olwyns and Arachnids

Tom went deathly pale and checked again. He could not see in the dark, but he felt something sticky and wet on his shoulder. He snapped his fingers and a little ball of fire appeared on the palm of his right hand. He was advanced enough with magic to be able to perform little things like this without a wand. By the flickering light of the tiny bluebell flame, Tom surveyed his shoulder. It was perfectly dry, and not bleeding at all. "I must be imagining things," he thought. But as he extinguished the flame, he was almost sure he felt his shoulder tingle a bit.

"Tom, are you listening?" Professor Dumbledore demanded.

Tom came back to earth with a jolt, and he turned his attention to the teacher. "Yes, sir," he replied swiftly. It was nine o'clock in the evening on a Thursday, the time set aside each week for Tom's private Transfiguration lessons. He had not mentioned his dream to anyone, and had been thinking about it a lot since it occurred, which had been about a month ago.

"Well, then, would you like to explain to me how it is possible to transfigure the largest objects?"

"Pretend it's a smaller one," Tom said dully, his chin in his hands. As Professor Dumbledore indicated the affirmative, Tom's eyes wandered to the window again. He had read like a madman over the summer, and he already knew pretty much everything about transfiguration. He was an Animagus, for heaven's sake, what more did he need to know?

"All right, then," said Dumbledore. He conjured a large block of concrete in the middle of the room. "Turn this into a pigeon," he invoked.

Tom idly lifted his wand, and he barely had to think about it to transfigure it. In an instant, there was a pigeon strutting around the floor. "Are you sure that's a pigeon?" said Dumbledore. "They have the iridescent breast feathers, remember?"

"No, you're describing a rock dove," Tom said flatly. "That bird on the floor is a real pigeon."

"You learn something new every day," said Dumbledore cheerfully.

"Speak for yourself," Tom muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

Tom looked up to see the teacher standing with his arms folded, brow furrowed slightly. He fixed Tom in that piercing sky-blue stare. "Is this terribly boring for you?" he asked quietly.

"I know it already... sorry..."

"Mmm." Dumbledore turned away, and Tom reverted to his old habit of lazily twirling his wand between his fingers like a baton, watching the sparks shoot out. Watching it made him even sleepier. Just as he was dropping off, Dumbledore stopped pacing, spun around, and snatched the wand out of Tom's outstretched hand.

"Hey! That's mine!" Tom yelled without thinking. He realized who he was addressing, and he bit his lip. "Sir," he added, his eyes darting down. He had found it hard to be near Dumbledore ever

since he had returned from summer vacation, for Dumbledore was quite well known for reading the Muggle newspapers, and if he had found out about Tom's father...

"I want to try something new," said Dumbledore casually, putting Tom's wand in the pocket of his tangerine-colored robes. From another pocket he withdrew a squeaking white mouse. Tom's insides lurched as he remembered the rat, the first creature upon whom he had used *Avada Kedavra*. Dumbledore set the baby mouse on the desk. "Transfigure this into a pencil box," he said.

"Well, er, don't I need my wand?"

"Do it without."

"Okay..." Tom rolled up the sleeves of his robes (Dumbledore looked taken aback at the scars on his right arm) and concentrated on turning the mouse into a pencil box. He felt a sudden surge of energy in his left arm, so, by instinct, he held out his hand in the direction of the mouse. He stared in amazement. A few sparks had shot from his fingertips and hit the mouse, which turned into a small, oblong box.

Dumbledore looked amazed, but not exactly surprised. "Well, you did it," he said. "Do you know what this means, Tom?"

"What?"

"Most wizards can only perform color-changing charms without a wand, but you--you can do more. It means that you are an Olwyn. It's a wizard who can perform any kind of transfiguration and a few simple charms without a wand and without using Song Charms." He looked very serious. "There were very few in history. Merlin was one; so was Cliodna. And... Salazar Slytherin was one." Tom's jaw dropped. "As you can probably tell from the names, all three were Welsh, and it is widely believed that they come from the same bloodline. Nobody outside that alleged bloodline has ever been an Olwyn."

"That's interesting," Tom said, feeling very ill but not willing to show it. "Well, as far as I know, I'm not related to any of them, so it must be some fluke," Tom lied smoothly.

"I was thinking more along the lines of..." Dumbledore trailed off. "You know about the Circle of Light, don't you, Tom?"

"Yes."

"It is said that the twelfth members of both Circles will be Olwyns," said Dumbledore quietly. "Surely you know, as I do, that you show every single sign of being a member of the Circle, and I have no doubt in my mind that you could... you could be the twelfth..."

The nasty voice in Tom's head was ecstatic. "Hear that, Voldemort?" the voice cackled. "You have *yet another* exceptional power! Use this in conjunction with your Dark magic, and you could take over the world!"

"Shut up, you great stupid prat!" Tom thought furiously.

"Your lesson is complete for today," said Professor Dumbledore. "You can go now, Tom."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks for the lesson," Tom heard himself say. He felt a smile on his face, but his insides did not reflect it. Bidding Dumbledore goodbye, Tom slung his bookbag over his shoulder and dashed down the hallway on the way to Slytherin Tower. His feelings were mixed

about being an Olwyn. Surely it was good to have some extra magical talent, but if that nasty little voice liked it at all, it had to be awful. Yet... There was something it had said earlier that stuck in his mind. However the better half of him disliked the idea, there was something alluring about the idea of world domination.

As he reached the portrait hole, he saw Francis Malfoy leaning in the corner of the hallway, Ulmer and Magnus on either side. Francis's grey eyes were glittering maliciously. "Good lesson?" he asked.

"And why the hell would you care?" Tom retorted softly.

"I have my reasons," said Francis carelessly. "Say, Mud--erm, Tom." Francis spat out Tom's name as though pronouncing it was causing him great pain. "I think we got off on the wrong foot. Truce?"

Tom smiled a little, a sarcastic glimmer in his eyes. "Why?"

"Like I said, Hamle--er, *Tom*, I have my reasons!" Francis said impatiently. "I need help with my homework, okay? So are we friends or what?" He held out his right hand to shake. Tom could not believe how insolent Francis was being. After three years of taunting and tormenting, he expected Tom to call it a truce? And only to help him with his homework! Without any change in expression, Tom slapped the other boy with all his might, which, especially considering how very thin he was, amounted to a lot. Magnus and Ulmer dove for him, but were thrown back against the wall by an invisible force. Still fairly deadpan, Tom said the password for the portrait of the wood nymph. As the painting swung aside, Tom heard Francis yell at his back, "You'll pay for that, Mudblood!"

"Mmm hmm. Right," Tom responded coolly, letting the portrait close behind him. He saw his friends sitting in a circle at the other end of the room, but he did not have time to worry himself with them. Earlier that day, Rubeus had pulled him aside and asked him to meet him near the entrance to the dungeons at midnight. He dashed up the stairs to the dormitory, and approximately a half-hour later, he was sitting on the floor near the dungeon entrance under the Invisibility Cloak, wondering what Rubeus wanted.

After another half was tallied to the hour, Tom checked his watch. It was twelve past midnight; where *was* he? This question was answered almost immediately. Rubeus appeared at the corner. "Tom?" he called. "Where are yeh?"

Tom folded up the cloak and pocketed it, got to his feet, then said, "Over here, Rubeus."

"Tom, yeh aren't goin' ter believe this. 'S amazin'."

"What is?"

"Yeh'll see. Follow me." Rubeus started down the dungeon steps, and Tom followed, at a loss as to what his friend needed. They reached the Potions dungeon and took a sharp left turn, arriving in an abandoned classroom. Tom could see a closet off in the far corner. Looking extremely excited, Rubeus dashed over to the closet and took out a basket lined with fluffy blankets and pillows. "Before I show yeh, yeh've got ter promise never ter tell anyone about 'im."

"I swear," Tom said carelessly.

"All righ', then." Rubeus folded back the blankets. "He's a bit sleepy, mind, usually he's more interestin'..."

Tom looked into the basket and felt his stomach plummet. Inside was the single largest spider Tom had ever seen in his life. There were eight glittering black eyes and eight hairy legs, each about the same length as one of Tom's arms. Tom was not arachnophobic, but the sight of this creature still made him feel nauseous. "Oh my God," he muttered.

"His name's Aragog," said Rubeus fondly, his face alight with rapture. "Just hatched this mornin'. Want ter hold him?"

"Er..." Deciding that his own personal qualms were not as important as Rubeus's feelings, Tom bit his lip and nodded. Without any sign of squeamishness, Rubeus plucked not-so-little Aragog out of his basket and placed him in Tom's arms.

It was rather like holding a squirmy puppy, only not as cute, with dribbling pincers instead of puppy drool, and with too many legs. Aragog's outer shell was a bit soft, as though it had not fully formed yet. Thus, because of the spider's incessant wriggling, it was like trying to keep hold of an enormous glob of grape jelly. Twice one of Aragog's whiplike arms swept across Tom's face, which would have hurt more if the shell was harder. "Isn' he beautiful?" Rubeus cooed. "Best pet I could ask fer, next to a dragon."

Tom immediately thought that if this was the best, he did not want to see the worst. "He's... er... well... interesting."

"Ugh, disgusting!" said someone in Parseltongue. Tom looked around Aragog to see a small dust snake sitting near his shoe. The little grey snakes were very common in the dungeon, and Tom sometimes made conversation with them during boring Potions lectures.

"I know," he whispered back to the small serpent, quietly enough so that Rubeus would not hear.

At this, Aragog suddenly began flailing uncontrollably. It tried to bite Tom's arm, but Rubeus got there first, scooping up his pet in a comforting embrace. "'S okay, Aragog... sh... 'Smatter with him, anyway?'

"I wouldn't know," Tom replied truthfully enough. Surely a spider could not tell when people were speaking Parseltongue... right?

"Yeh'd better go," said Rubeus darkly. "He... doesn't much seem ter like yeh... 'S nothin' against yeh, Tom, but I don' think it's safe for yeh to stay..."

All too happy to leave, Tom bade his friend goodbye and dashed up the staircase, waiting until he was hidden from view to wipe the spider spit off his robes. Disgusted, Tom made for the nearest washroom and washed his hands, using a Scouring Charm to get the rest of the goo off his robe front. He had never even known spiders salivated, but perhaps the giant variety was different. When he was finished, Tom pocketed his wand and left the washroom, walking head-on into Nathan Potter, who was on his way in and had not seen him. "Sorry!" Nathan said cheerfully. "Oh, it's you! Hi, Tom!"

"Good evening, Nathan," Tom replied softly. He tried to brush past, but Nathan was too fast for him. He seemed to have forgotten is errand.

"Say, mate, would you mind doing me a favor?" Nathan asked pleasantly. Before Tom could answer, Nathan continued. "My little cousin--you know, Myrtle--has been having some trouble with bullies. There's this girl, a Slytherin first-year, who's been bugging her. Olive Hornby, do you know her?"

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Unfortunately," he hissed. Olive was one of the Slytherins he liked the least. "What do you want me to do about this? I have no control over my peers."

Nathan frowned a bit. "Nothing. Just... keep an eye on Myrtle for me, okay?"

"Why me?" Tom demanded, his voice quiet but icy with suspicion.

"I--well, look, everyone knows you're the best dueler in the school," said Nathan matter-of-factly. "I figured if anyone made fun of her, you could--"

"I see. So you want me to be your cousin's mercenary."

"I never said that!" Nathan said desperately. "Look, can you just look out for her? Please?"

Tom gave Nathan a scrutinizing look. "Fine," he groaned.

Nathan looked ecstatic. "Thank you, Tom, you're the best!"

Tom watched the Hufflepuff prefect round the corner, waiting until he had gone to allow himself a whole-hearted frown. He was not sure what it was, but there was something about Nathan Potter that made him nervous. He shivered suddenly. Why did he always cringe whenever he heard Nathan's name?

During the next two months, Tom found himself bogged down with work. He grew to spend up to twelve hours in the library every night, and even more on the weekends. Professor Dumbledore was teaching him Olwyn magic, which, to Tom's relief, was extremely challenging. The down side was that Tom had to read as many books as possible if he wanted to keep up. His regular studies were assigning more book work, as well. On top of this, he had started researching the Chamber of Secrets in earnest, more out of curiosity than anything else. Sure, he would like to make Muggles unhappy, but mostly he was just curious to know about it. All this, in addition to his nightly studies of the Dark Arts, meant that Tom had very little free time, and he usually only slept about two hours a night.

Whatever free time Tom had was spent with his friends, who seemed to think that he was neglecting them. In any case, Tom's view of his friends certainly had changed. Half of him saw them as supportive people who were not exactly his first priority, while the other told him to spend more time with them, for he would need their aid on his rise to power.

Power. Tom hated and loved the word; was repelled by it and reveled in it. Here he was, possibly one of the most brilliant wizards in history. Should a wunderkind spend his life working in some insignificant Ministry job? Was a career in teaching really all that interesting? No, Tom set his sights higher. He wanted control, he wanted people to look up to him. He could not be the Minister of Magic; no, that was silly. The Minister, as everyone knew, had absolutely no power, and all his decisions were made by his subordinates. Tom wanted real power... He wanted people to respect him, as they never had before Hogwarts. Both halves of him craved respect, but their views on getting it were different. The better half (or the goody-two-shoes half, as Tom called it) insisted that he had to get it through hard work and perseverance. The other thought that he should keep studying the Dark Arts and use them to get what he wanted.

In any case, Tom's workload multiplied considerably, and by the end of November, he was starting to feel it a little. He would study his schoolwork from five to nine, the Chamber of Secrets from nine to midnight, and the Dark Arts from midnight to four or five in the morning. The teachers noticed that though he was always attentive in class, he was always very pale from

lack of sleep, and even fell asleep on occasion--always when his class work was finished, of course. On the thirtieth of November, Tom woke up to see Professor Twiddy shaking his shoulder, looking very concerned.

"I think you should go and see Madam Viola," she said to him.

"What? No, no, I'm fine," said Tom hastily, though he looked so pale that he could almost have been a ghost, and he had lavender crescents under his eyes.

Professor Twiddy looked at him rather sternly. "That's the fourth time in two weeks you've fallen asleep in my class, and according to the other teachers, this isn't the only class it happens in. We're worried about you."

"Don't be," Tom yawned. "I'm... perfectly all right..." This was utterly unconvincing, for at that moment he fell asleep again.

Throwing her hands up in the air, Professor Twiddy shook his shoulder again. Before he could protest, she escorted him to the hospital wing. Madam Viola told him to sit down on one of the beds and hustled off. To Tom's horror, it was Professor Dumbledore to enter next, followed by Professor Chapman. Tom grimaced, seizing the bedpost to keep himself from running away. If Dumbledore found out, he would be done for...

Professor Dumbledore sat down in a chair next to the bed, looking both concerned and--Tom could not exactly name the other emotion, but it looked almost dismal. Chapman preferred to remain standing. "Mr. Riddle," Chapman said slowly, "I think I speak for the whole staff when I express my concern about your health."

Tom gulped.

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. "It has come to my attention in particular, Tom, that you have been spending an irrational amount of time studying. You've been spending hours on assignments that most students finish in thirty minutes."

"I want to do a good job," Tom said a little defensively.

"I understand that," Chapman said, "but you have to admit, it is a little--off--to study until midnight every night."

"Longer," said Dumbledore sharply. "Francis Malfoy has informed me that Tom sometimes sneaks down to the library under an Invisibility Cloak to do even more research, and doesn't come back until around five in the morning."

Tom's knuckles went white around the bedpost, but nobody noticed. "That little bastard," he muttered.

"Are you serious?" Chapman stared.

Dumbledore nodded and turned on Tom. "That's a serious offense, sneaking into the library. Twenty points an occurrence, at least--"

"I'll kill him!" Tom mumbled, too softly for the teachers to hear. "Francis, you aren't going to get away from this alive..."

Chapman shook his head at the other professor. "It's a sign that he's driven," Chapman said. "Perhaps a little obsessive, but I don't think he meant to break any rules. Right, Tom?" Tom

nodded innocently, widening his eyes in an attempt to look even less like someone who would deliberately cause trouble. "Right, then. I say give him a warning and take, say, ten points."

"Congratulations, Trahern Chapman, you are my new favorite teacher," Tom thought with relief, as Dumbledore nodded reluctantly.

"But I want you to promise me, Tom, that you'll ease up a little," Chapman continued. "And stop sneaking down to the library in the dead of night."

"I will," Tom said, trying to look blameless. As they were turning to go, Tom asked, "Professor Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore turned. "Yes?"

"Do you think you can ask Headmaster Dippet if I can stay at Hogwarts next summer?"

"I will," Dumbledore promised. With that, the two teachers left, and Madam Viola re-entered, wielding a bottle of Pepperup Potion.

19. Fourth Year, Thrice Fallen

As it happened, Professor Dumbledore managed to get Dippet to sign a special permission form so that Tom could spend the next summer holiday at Hogwarts. Tom was ecstatic; this meant that he was exempt from going back to the orphanage. Even though Mr. Carney was back to thinking that Tom was just an ordinary boy, he was sure to be just as much of a cad as usual, and Tom did not want to mix himself up with that again.

He was, therefore, plagued with guilt for not being quite true to his word that he would stop studying so hard. In fact, if anything, he was studying harder, but he was growing used to his abnormal sleeping schedule and was soon back to being perfectly attentive in class. He also made sure that Francis Malfoy was not watching when he sneaked down to the library for his Dark Arts studies, which he decided to slow down with so that he could have more time to look up the Chamber of Secrets. He grew used to being pulled aside by Rubeus, who always wanted to show Tom another dangerous pet he was trying to keep, and to making sure Olive Hornby left Myrtle Potter alone. Tom had rarely spoken to Myrtle, but when he had, he had not liked her much.

His birthday and Christmas flew by, and nothing interesting happened until about mid-February, when Tom went to his usual Divination class. He met Lili near the entrance to North Tower. She looked a little jumpy, but not enough to arouse Tom's worry too much. Professor Camden threw the door open and the class clambered in. As usual, Tom sat with Lili, who was the only friend he had in that class.

"We're finally done with bird entrails," Professor Camden announced. Most of the class cheered; looking at the future through goose guts was not the most appealing work in the world. "We're moving on to palmistry today," Professor Camden continued, jumping around exuberantly. If there was one thing Tom liked about the teacher, it was that she enjoyed doing her job. She explained the fine points of palmistry to them, saying that she would first read all of their palms and next lesson pair them up to read each other's.

The students lined up in front of the professor, and she read them all very enthusiastically. Tom noted with some satisfaction that she told Francis he had a very short lifeline. Lili was second-last, and Tom stood behind her. After exchanging a few whispered words with Professor Camden (who for some reason did not read Lili's palm), Lili headed to the back of the room again, and it was Tom's turn.

Feeling suddenly apprehensive, Tom took a few steps forward. Professor Camden looked at him analytically, her hoop earrings jangling. "I'll need to see your wand hand," she said. When he held out his left, Camden's face went even more cryptic. "Right-o," she sighed, and began.

"Let's see here... your lifeline--oh my! That's... bizarre!"

"What is?" Tom asked curiously. He looked at the palm of his left hand and smiled a bit. It was zigzagged with lines that were completely different from the norm, forming something that looked vaguely like an S.

Professor Camden was at a loss for words for a moment. "Tom, that's... incredible! I've never seen that happen before!" Now she looked excited. "Okay... your lifeline... very long, I must say. But see how it breaks off for about a decade's worth? It suddenly goes very thin... barely even there... then it takes up again."

Tom stared at it. She was right.

"Your head line is also unusual," she continued. "See? It goes in a curve, and it's one of the thickest I've ever seen. I've never seen that before, either. And your heart line--" she hesitated. "It's very thick to start with, and it tapers down till it's as thin as a hair. There are three breaks in it; one is adjacent to the very beginning of your life, the second, to somewhere around ten, and the other one not long after that, maybe four or five years. After that--it isn't there."

"So I get my heart broken three times?" Tom mused.

"Rather... from the depth of the line, all are women." Tom blushed furiously as the class burst out laughing. "None of them, however, signify romantic love. That will never come for you, Tom. After the third break, you will never love again."

"Now, to the fingerprints... all accidentals." She frowned slightly. "Is that the case on your other hand, too? That signifies cunning."

"So what else is new?" someone whispered. Tom could not suppress a small smile.

"Now... to your other... characteristics." Camden looked suddenly grim. "Left-handed?"

Remembering Mr. Ollivander, Tom gave an exasperated sigh. "Yes," he groaned.

"That signifies power in the most extreme sense," Camden responded, her voice very quiet. "It is rare in the world in general, to be sure, but only one wizard in five billion is left-handed." Tom's jaw dropped. "Left-handers are usually extremely powerful... but also violently ambitious. Still, extremely rare. In fact," she said, "there are only three in recorded history; Salazar Slytherin, Lyra Xavena, and Amelbius." Tom stared at her blankly. A Dark Arts-oriented Hogwarts founder, a Dark witch and prophetess, and... the very creator of the Circle of Darkness. No wonder Ollivander had been shocked, it seemed to have Dark Arts connotations...

"That's all," Professor Camden said, giving Tom a sudden, cheery smile that seemed rather forced. Tom nodded so slightly it was almost invisible and walked back to his seat, the eyes of the other Divination students jamming into him like steak knives.

As he sat down across from Lili, he realized that she looked a little weepy. "Is there a problem?" he asked her.

Lili looked up, biting her lip. "I asked Professor Camden--"

"That's Ariana to you, Lili!" Professor Camden called, though she could not possibly have heard.

"I asked her not to read my palm," Lili finished.

"Why?" Tom asked curiously.

"I just don't want to know," Lili said, rocking backward and forward in her chair. Tom tried to get her to explain, but she wouldn't. The bell rang noisily and Tom gave up on her, getting up and leaving. Still, he could not help but wonder. Lili was usually a very cheerful person. If she had been that worried about having her palm read, something else had to be wrong.

However Tom tried to talk her into telling, Lili refused to let him in on what was bothering her. She soon returned to her old self, but Tom could tell she was putting it on to keep from worrying anybody. He spent the rest of the year either in the library, playing Quidditch, or, rarely, with his friends. Usually, he spent time with Lili and Rubeus rather than his Slytherin friends, who seemed to have grown away from him. After exams ended, Tom finally let up on the studying a bit, but

the drop in intellectual stimulation affected him rather like withdrawal from an addiction. Thus, when Lili offered to start teaching him Chinese, he accepted the offer, and picked up on the language very quickly.

Tom had a good time at the end-of-year ceremony, feeling better because he knew that he would not have to leave this all behind. The Hall was decorated with blue and bronze, for Ravenclaw had won the House Cup, and for the third year in a row, Tom made the top of the Honor Roll. After the feast, the Slytherins had a rather noisy party. It lasted until four o'clock in the morning, ending only when Professor Chapman turned up in a nightcap and a bathrobe and told them to be quiet so that the Hufflepuffs in the next tower over could get some sleep.

Yawning and sighing, Tom trudged up to the dormitory and sat down on his bed, not really wanting to go to sleep. The sun was already rising, and within minutes the dormitory was glowing with a dull gold. Richard Zabini, whining like a four-year-old, dropped off to sleep immediately. Francis just sat on his bed and glared out the window, not doing anything. Once in a while, his eyes flicked over to where Tom was sitting. Adrian and Zuhayr sat in the corner, chatting and playing Exploding Snap. After a short time, Tom realized he was a lot more tired than he had thought. Without changing out of his robes, he drifted off to sleep.

He woke up feeling strangely dreamy, as though he had overslept, and it took him a few minutes to realize that it was nine o'clock--that is, in the evening. It was possibly the first decent night's sleep he had had since September of the previous year. Feeling ravenous, Tom changed into Muggle clothes and headed down to the deserted common room. A note was Spellotaped to the wall next to the portrait hole.

**We decided to let you sleep in; God knows
you needed it. There will be a meal ready for
you in the Great Hall whenever you come
down.**

--The Professors

Yawning, Tom pushed the portrait open and walked through the hallway down to the Great Hall. His footsteps resounded noisily, echoing off the walls, and the corridors seemed strangely empty without the boisterous babble of students. As he reached the Great Hall, he found it deserted as well, which made him feel a little nervous. He sat down at the Slytherin table, and a plate full of food magically appeared before him.

Looking around the Hall, Tom's eyes fell on the stained glass windows. They were really quite pretty, one design for each House. Gryffindor's was of a blond man with a sword and shield. Hufflepuff's depicted a teenaged girl with very curly brown hair who was examining some plants. Tom's favorite had to be the Ravenclaw window; it showed a young woman with flaming red hair and brown eyes, an open book in her right hand, while her left hand rested on a brass telescope. The window for Slytherin was also quite nice. Its subject had black hair and turquoise eyes, and Slytherin, too, was reading a book. A silvery snake had coiled itself around his arm.

After Tom had finished his dinner, he started up to the library, but he halted outside the staff room door. Someone was talking inside. He knew that he should not pry, but his curiosity got the better of him.

"...Dark supporters are getting restless," Professor Dumbledore was saying. "Messages have been found in the sky all over the Isles; 'The Dark Heir Cometh'... 'The Circle is Complete'..."

"I still don't see what it has to do with Riddle," Professor Sevigny replied huffily.

Twiddly took the initiative. "Albus and I have both noticed it... he's definitely in the Circle. If the Dark Heir really is coming, we have to prepare him."

Professor Sevigny hesitated. "Have either of you considered the possibility that he could *be* this 'Dark Heir'?"

"That's ridiculous!" Twiddly exclaimed. "He doesn't strike me as evil at all. Besides, the prophecy says that the twelfth Dark member will have killed more than one person by the age of fourteen. Tom's fourteenth birthday was in December, and he hasn't murdered anyone, now, has he?" Tom almost fainted, but managed to avoid it. It could not be... he was not a member of the Circle of Darkness... yet Miravez had told him he had both marks. Not much feeling like listening to any more, Tom walked away toward his purlieu in the library. He felt a little dizzy.

That one not-so-little fact did not make him a Dark wizard... did it?

Tom spent as much time as he could that summer studying the Chamber of Secrets, but he also had to keep it from the teachers. When he was not reading, he was usually out on the grounds, enjoying the nice weather. He was the only student staying at Hogwarts over the summer, so the teachers allowed him to sit at the staff table. He had some very interesting debates about philosophy with Professor Twiddly, the Head of Ravenclaw House, and all the discussions with the teachers were enjoyable. He sent an owl to Diagon Alley to order his school things, and they arrived in the middle of July.

Slowly, he began to forget about the argument in the staff room, and it only returned to his mind when he was unable to get to sleep late at night. He had not mentioned it to Nepenthe--indeed, Nepenthe did not know that Tom had killed his father in the first place. Suffering in silence was the only option, and living at the orphanage had taught him this skill.

The day before the start of term, Tom came down to tea to see two extra people at the staff table. One was tall and pretty, while the other was very small, sitting in the former's lap. Seeing him, the tall newcomer stood up, looking ecstatic. "Tom Riddle? Is that you?"

"It is indeed," said Dumbledore. It took Tom a few seconds to recognize her.

"Mrs. McGonagall?" he said incredulously.

Medéa McGonagall nodded enthusiastically and rushed over to meet him. Minerva, who had grown considerably, eyeballed him with curiosity. She had grown a head full of extremely curly black hair. "How have you been, Tom?" Medéa asked.

"Fine," Tom shrugged. "You?"

"Great! Minnie's a lot of trouble, but she's worth it... always getting into things, bless her! Want to hold her?" Tom nodded tentatively and Medéa placed the little girl in his arms. Minerva puffed up her face so that she looked like a chipmunk. Tom felt very uncomfortable, but he decided that she was at least better than Aragog.

"Why are you two here?" Tom asked.

Medéa sighed. "It's bad business, Tom... afraid I can't tell you. All I'll say is I'll be here until about February."

Tom cocked an eyebrow suspiciously, but made no comment. Meanwhile, Minerva was tugging on his ear rather forcefully. "Booboo," she said loudly.

"And my eardrum's going to have one if you keep on pulling on my ear like that," Tom winced. He tried to pry her hand off his ear, but she had it in a vice grip. The teachers laughed, and Medéa managed to coax Minerva to let go.

"Sorry about that," she sighed, taking Minerva. "Told you she gets into things."

"It's okay," Tom said, sitting down at the table.

Medéa nodded. She conjured a roomy playpen for Minerva and sat down as well. "So, Tom, what have you been doing with your life since I last saw you?"

Tom gave Medéa a very vague outline of the goings-on of the previous year and a half, and listened idly as she explained what she had been doing. Medéa chatted with the teachers once she was done with him, and Tom, growing a little bored, looked down into his teacup. The tea leaves were lying all over the bottom. Tom swirled the cup around as Professor Camden had taught them, narrowed his eyes, and looked past the tea leaves.

He then said something that would have made Hannah put a bar of soap in his mouth. The teachers looked at him, dumbfounded. Tom ignored them, staring into the cup in horror. Instead of symbols, the tea leaves had formed words.

IT IS COMING SOON
THE THIRD AND FINAL
BREAK OF HEART
COMES WITH THE SNOW
YOUR LOSS WILL BE INFINITE
AND WITH IT GOES YOUR INNOCENCE
LET THE SPECTER'S BATTLE BEGIN

"TOM!" Professor Sevigny said in shock. "Where did you hear that word?"

Dumbledore, however, ignored the fact that Tom had used a swear word that most seventh-years didn't know. "What's the matter?" he asked swiftly.

"I--oh, it's nothing," Tom lied, though for once it was not at all convincing. "I--er... well... I have a headache. I think I'll... turn in early..." Before anyone could ask him any more questions, Tom stood up sharply and dashed up to his dormitory. "Let the Specter's battle begin," he muttered, shivering uncontrollably. He was never wrong when he performed divination, and if a battle with the Specter meant what he thought it did...

As soon as he reached his bedroom, he set down the teacup on his bedside table and was rather violently sick in the washroom. How was he supposed to fight the Circle of Darkness that winter? He certainly was not ready to do it yet. He had never heard of the Circle of Darkness winning, but it seemed to him that the twelfth and final battle should be the one that chose whether or not the world fell into darkness. In any case, he was in trouble.

Just how much, he did not know.

Indeed, over the first three months of school, the teachers seemed to be trying to prepare him for something. The teachers gave him special assignments that seemed to be geared toward self-defense and dueling, and Tom was sure the prefects had been instructed to keep an eye on him. Nathan Potter started escorting him from class to class, and as Tom was supposed to be watching Myrtle, he suddenly found himself being smothered by Potters. The teachers treated him rather formally, and Tom got the impression they wanted to keep their distance in case he actually was part of the *other* Circle.

Tom only found solace in two things; the library and Lili Po. Seeing as Tom's closest Slytherin friends had grown fonder of each other than of him, Tom found himself spending more and more time with the Ravenclaw girl. He even cut back on his studies a little--though not very much. Tom always put aside some time on Saturdays to go for a fly around the school grounds with his friend, and she had picked up his Chinese lessons as soon as she returned to school. Tom was getting very good at the language, but he could not for the life of him understand the writing system.

Somehow--Tom could not quite say how--he and Lili went from close friends to best friends. Being best friends with Lili, however, was quite different from being best friends with one of the Slytherins. His Slytherin friends were fond of playing established, "ordinary" games, such as Exploding Snap and Gobstones. With Lili, he was more likely to be called off to explore the secret passages of the school, play an imaginary game (which he had not done since he was four years old), or have a rather raucous match of wizard chess. The Slytherins disliked debating current topics, whereas Lili reveled in it, proving herself to be a great arguer. She was so spontaneous that she sometimes sent owls to Tom at two in the morning asking if he wanted a fencing match in the trophy room.

It was after one of these nighttime duels in the middle of December that Tom could be found sitting at his dormitory window, staring out over the grounds. A heavy snow was beginning to fall, covering Hogwarts and the surrounding area in a thick, frigid white blanket. He had just turned fifteen a few days ago, but he was, as usual, awkwardly tall for his age. He was at least six feet tall by now, possibly even an inch taller than that.

With a sigh, Tom ran a hand through his hair and watched the snow fall. Fifteen, already. Where had the time gone?

"Masssster?" asked someone timidly.

Tom looked down and saw Nepenthe staring up at him, golden eyes glowing slightly. "Hello, Nepenthe," he said softly.

"Masssster, I have ssssome unpleasant news," Nepenthe hissed quietly. "As I was exploring the ssssschool thissss afternoon, I happened to hear the other ssssnakessss talking... They told me that there is a placcce in the cassstle where none of them go, for a monssster lives there and kills all who come near."

Tom shrugged. "Sounds like Aragog," he muttered. "I'll have a talk with Rubeus about it, then you won't have to worry. Okay?"

"All right," Nepenthe said, and he slithered into his basket. Tom turned back to the window and gazed out again, wondering why he felt like something bad was going to happen.

The next morning, Tom woke up to find the dormitory very active. The other Slytherin boys were busy pulling on cloaks, mittens, boots, and hats, and it took Tom a few seconds to recall that today was the first Hogsmeade Saturday of the year. Tom had never visited Hogsmeade,

preferring to stay in the library and study. Yawning and stretching, he got out of bed and watched Francis and Richard squabble.

"You coming this time, Tom?" Adrian asked curiously, tugging on a hat over his curly yellow hair.

"No," Tom said, as usual. Adrian and Zuhayr rolled their eyes in sync. After the other boys had gone, Tom changed into his robes and headed off to the library, his bookbag over his shoulder. Just as he was opening his Arithmancy book, the library door burst open so noisily that Mr. Lamont threw the newcomer a dirty look.

Tom looked up to see Lili running toward him, her red cloak and long black hair flying out behind her. "Studying again, are you?" she asked with a smile.

"Er, yes," Tom replied.

"No you're not," Lili grinned. "You're coming to Hogsmeade, and you're going to like it. Trust me."

"I'm not coming," Tom said without thinking.

Lili seized his arm. "You're coming," she insisted, her eyes dancing. "You're coming or else I'm going to use the Jelly-Legs curse on you and make you come. Now follow me." She dragged Tom out of his chair and out the library door, leaving Mr. Lamont staring after them irritably.

After stopping into the Slytherin common room to pick up Tom's cloak, they headed down to the entrance hall, where all the other students were waiting to be let out of the double doors. A bell rang somewhere, and they headed out of the school. Hogsmeade was a short walk away, and when they got there, Tom was amazed. Immediately, he felt very stupid for not coming earlier. He wanted to explore every shop and look at everything the little town had to offer. "Want to go to the Three Broomsticks and get something to drink?" Lili asked.

Tom nodded, and Lili led him into a crowded pub, which was doing a roaring trade despite the early hour. There was nowhere to sit, so Lili ordered two bottled butterbeers to go and they left the pub, chatting. Over the next hour, they explored the post office, Dervish and Bangs, and Honeydukes, and were just on their way to see the town museum when Serena Birch appeared. "Tom?" she asked. "Can I talk to you? There's something I didn't get yesterday in Arithmancy. Could you help me?"

"Sure," Tom said, and he turned to Lili. "You go ahead," he said, "I'll meet you on the town green in a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay," Lili said agreeably. She walked away, looking over her shoulder once or twice. Lili frowned slightly. She was not sure why, but something in the air made her feel nervous. Very nervous. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and sped up a little bit, shivering.

As she reached the town green, Lili sat down heavily on a bench, watching the passersby and waiting for Tom to turn up. Now the jumpy feeling had reached a fever pitch, so intense that she was almost nauseous. Ever since she had had that dream about seeing herself die, she had had a lot of trouble with those feelings of uneasiness, but this was too much. She had never had it this badly before.

There was a sudden shouting noise nearby. Lili looked up to see a man in jet-black robes wielding a wand. "The Circle is complete, I say!" he yelled madly. "The Dark Heir is coming!" The witches and wizards nearby were backing away, screaming. Apparently, his words meant something to

them, but Lili had no idea what he was talking about. All she knew was that her gut told her to leave, and fast.

Lili stood up slowly and tried to duck through the crowd and away from the green. To her horror, the madman made a sudden lunge for the crowd, right in her direction, and his hand closed around her wrist. "Help!" she started to shout, but her captor clamped a hand tightly over her mouth. She willed the witches and wizards around her to come to her aid, but they were being repelled by some invisible force the madman had conjured.

Meanwhile, he continued to rave. "The twelfth and greatest Dark Heir has arrived!" he roared, keeping Lili in a semi-headlock at his side. "On comes darkness from here! No one will be spared! Mudbloods and purebloods will all suffer! This--" he indicated Lili "--is an example of what is to come!"

"This isn't happening to me," Lili thought desperately. "Someone, please..."

The madman let go of her, and she cried out for help at the top of her lungs, but to no avail. No one knew how to break through the invisible wall. Lili made a break for it, but she had never been a very good runner.

"This happens to those who oppose the Dark Heir!" the man shrieked. "*Crucio!*"

Just as Lili had almost got away, she collapsed into the snow, shuddering with pain. It was as though white-hot lacerations were splitting along her skin; as though hot water was being poured on her, was running through her veins; as though some sort of animal was ripping her to pieces. Every bone in her body felt like it had shattered; the pain was a sting, an ache, a burn, all in one, and magnified a thousand times. The agony came tumbling from her lips in an anguished scream, and she felt herself twitching and flailing, just as she had seen happen to Tom in their second year...

The madman lifted the curse, and just as relief was washing over her, Lili was possessed by it once more. He left it there for an eternity... every atom in her body was searing with that bizarre pain. It was a full ten minutes before the curse was lifted again. Lili struggled to get up, but she could not. Three words stood out in her mind, three words that made her heart sink even lower. "Such is fate."

"I don't really get that exponent thing, either," Serena was saying. "Can you explain--" She halted as the air was rent by a piercing, continuous scream.

"What's that?" Tom asked, his stomach dropping. The scream was unearthly and haunting, and Tom had a horrible feeling that he recognized the voice. It was coming from the town green. "Serena, get a teacher!"

Serena did not need telling twice. She dashed off toward the school, and Tom made for the crowded green. After ten minutes, the screaming stopped, and Tom managed to push through the crowd and see what was happening. A man in dusty travelling robes was standing over a small, prone figure in a red cloak, his wand out. "No mercy!" he shrieked. "*Crucio!*"

The girl in the red cloak started screaming again, and Tom drew out his wand. "*Stupefy!*" he shouted, aiming it at the madman. He collapsed, and his victim stopped screaming. As her head lolled in his direction, Tom saw the face, and his worst suspicions were confirmed. He fell to his

knees at her side, taking her shoulders in his hands. "LILI! Lili, say something!" Lili was, to say the least, in bad shape. She looked frighteningly pale, and her eyes looked glassy.

Lili coughed, and Tom winced as a little blood came out of her mouth. "Tom?" she asked, her voice hoarse.

Tom's chest felt like it had been filled with warm water. He could not lose Lili, she was all he had left... "Lili--hold on, you'll be okay."

"Must be a family tradition," Lili sighed, coughing again. "Dying via the Cruciatus Curse... first Papa, now me..."

"No, Lili... you'll be okay, I promise... just stay with me for a while, and Madam Viola will right you..."

"She won't," Lili spluttered, some more blood coming out of her throat. "Tom--Tom, I'm sorry, I can't stay here--"

Tom's knuckles whitened around her shoulders, and a lump was rising in his throat. "Lili, you *can*! Please!"

Lili drew in a breath and released it slowly. "Tom... I love you."

"You *what*?"

A small smile crept across her face. "No, not romantically... but you're the best friend I've ever had, Tom... I don't want to leave you, but I can't stop it. Just... remember me..."

At this point, Tom completely forgot he hated hugs. He embraced Lili fiercely, not caring if he was teased for the rest of his life for it. "I love you, Lili... oh, God, please don't die!"

"I can't help it..."

"You don't understand!" Tom wailed. "You're all I have! Please! Jesus Christ, stay with me!"

"Tom... I can't..." Tom let go of her, and she looked at him glassily. "Don't forget me," she said simply. At this point, she was overcome by a horrible coughing fit, and when her head fell back, it did not rise again.

"LILI! Lili, please... oh, Lili, I'm sorry!" Tom whispered, hugging her again. Tears were coursing down his face, and for once he did not worry about looking like an idiot. He just sat there, cradling his friend in his arms and murmuring her name, as though willing her to wake up. The onlookers just stared, transfixed, too stunned to do anything.

At that moment, Professor Dumbledore stepped into the circle that had formed around the area, Serena Birch in tow. He saw the unconscious madman lying at one end of the circle, and Tom and Lili at the other. Forcing himself to stay calm, he crossed over to his students and placed a hand on Tom's shoulder. "Is she all right?" he asked.

Tom looked up, his eyes shimmering with tears. "Three in a row," he said softly. "The only three people I've ever loved are dead... Mum, Hannah... Oh, God, what's wrong with me?"

Dumbledore's face went pale. "She's at peace now, Tom," he replied quietly. "Let me take her."

Tom reluctantly stood up, and he watched blankly as the professor scooped Lili up and instructed the town police on what to do with the madman. There was what felt like an empty

space in his chest, as though someone had ripped his heart out and thrown it into a gutter. And yet, even in his misery, he remembered something.

Professor Camden had been right.

20. Specter Battles and Discoveries

Sighing heavily, Tom turned the dusty parchment page of the manuscript, squinting to see the letters. He really should have been wearing his reading glasses, but he had accidentally left them up in his dormitory and was in no mood to be bothered at getting them. He leaned in close to the musty-smelling pages, eyes alert for anything that might be of aid. Every so often, Tom would dip his quill in his ink bottle and scribble down another note, but aside from that, he just read.

It was October of 1947, nearly a whole year after Lili had died. Tom had changed dramatically since then, both physically and in character. He was even taller, though his growth rate seemed to be slowing down at last, and his features were rather more defined than they had been. But this was not nearly as striking as the changes that had occurred in his mind.

Tom had spent the last ten months in a sort of haze. Right after he first fully comprehended what had happened, that old anguish had started to set in. Not wanting to feel that again, Tom forced his sorrow into anger. Though he knew it was bizarre to blame Muggles this time, he had grown used to the idea that Muggles caused all of the world's problems, and he had become obsessed with finding out everything about the Chamber of Secrets. He hoped if he got enough information, he might be able to find the Heir and get him to work with him. He had so much anger in him that he had to make someone suffer, and he did not care how many Muggle-borns he had to hurt or kill in the process. As long as their Muggle parents were miserable, that was all he cared about. Tom had become so manic-depressive that his friends were starting to grow afraid of him. Good, he had thought, he wanted people to fear him.

With a slight groan of exasperation, Tom slammed the book shut. It was no use, the silly thing had absolutely no information. Tom ran a hand through his hair and opened the next book, his prefect badge catching the light and glinting angrily silver in the dim library. Mr. Lamont gave him an irritable look, and Tom responded with a forced smile. In his eyes, Squibs were just the same as Muggles, if not worse.

There was a sudden booming noise, and moments later, Rubeus emerged around the bookshelves. He looked tired. "Hello," Tom said softly. Rubeus whirled gracelessly and stared.

"Tom! Yeh--yeh gave me a frigh'... what're yeh doin'?"

"Studying," Tom replied. "You?"

Rubeus looked a little uncomfortable. "I'm tryin' ter find summat on what ter feed a thousan' kilo spider. Aragog's been askin' fer some real food... seems ter think that mush isn' good enough anymore."

Tom coughed. It seemed to him that the spider probably wanted to eat a human, but he did not voice this opinion. "Good luck with that, Rubeus," he responded kindly, though in his mind he was picturing an enormous spider rampaging through the hallways. He smiled a little when he imagined it ripping Philip Cedric up into little pieces and gobbling him up, and smiled even wider when he pictured Francis Malfoy meeting this fate.

Rubeus gave Tom a funny look. "Yeh all righ', Tom?" he asked curiously. "Yeh look a li'l bit peaked, and yeh're smilin' like summat's funny but nothin' is."

"Hmmm?" Tom asked, a little angry at being jerked away from his daydream about his enemies' demises.

"Yeh haven' been gettin' much sleep, have yeh?" Rubeus asked, concerned. "Why don' yeh go ter sleep? Yeh can study later, yeh've got all weekend."

Tom felt a retort tingling on the tip of his tongue, but seeing as Rubeus was a good two feet taller and four times wider than he was, Tom was not exactly willing to argue. "Very well," he said with false submission, discreetly shoving a few books into his bookbag. "Good night, Rubeus."

Rubeus grinned in response and started scavenging about in the animal care section, while Tom got up slowly and strode out of the library. Wrapped up in his thoughts, Tom paid no attention to where he was going and crashed into someone on his way up the stairs to the tower. "Pardon," he muttered without looking up.

"Tom?" came Professor Dumbledore's voice. Tom stopped dead in his tracks and looked up, wide-eyed. Dumbledore was giving him a scrutinizing look. "Is everything all right?" he asked. "You look asleep on your feet."

"I'm fine," Tom squeaked, his stomach lurching.

Professor Dumbledore's eyes narrowed a bit, and he nodded once. "You need to cut back on the studying," he said simply. "You may be excused, Mr. Riddle."

Tom gratefully ducked out of the hallway and dashed for the portrait hole, heart beating very quickly. He had always got the impression that Professor Dumbledore either thought he was mad or disliked him, but of late, Tom knew it. Dumbledore always took a long time to answer Tom's questions as though they were suspicious questions to ask, and whenever he looked at the boy his eyes would go strangely flinty. Tom was positive that Dumbledore suspected Tom was studying more than just schoolwork, but the teacher never let on. It got rather exasperating after a while.

With a heavy sigh, Tom solemnly gave the password to the painting of the wood nymph. The painting swung aside and Tom entered, looking around the common room. It was entirely empty, perfect for studying. He seated himself at one of the tables and took out a book he had borrowed from the Restricted Section. He summoned his reading glasses, put them on, and started reading.

"Up late, aren't we?" asked a sudden, cold voice. Tom whirled around to find the speaker, and Francis Malfoy looked over the back of his armchair mildly. Aside from growing a little nastier, he had not changed one jot. "Practicing your suicidal soliloquies, Hamlet?" he asked, smirking.

Taking off his glasses calmly, Tom told Francis to do something that he would never have dared to say in front of Dumbledore. Francis just smirked wider.

"I'll wait on that until you tell me what you're up to," he said cheerfully. "Oh, I get it... moping over your *beloved* Lili?"

Earlier on in his life, Tom would have cursed Francis promptly, but Tom simply drew out his wand, eyeing Francis slowly, waiting for further provocation. "What of it?" he demanded.

Francis shrugged. "Well, she was a pureblood... I thought your people respected us purebloods enough not to sigh about us and daydream about what may have been."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Anyone, pureblood or no, who daydreams about you, must have very serious mental problems. Now for your information, Francis, I am studying and I would prefer if you shut your face so that I can continue."

"Make me, Mudblood," Francis said carelessly.

Tom stood up sharply, sending his books tumbling to the floor, and pointed his wand at Francis. "Did you just compare me to a Muggle?" he asked softly.

"And if I did?" Francis sneered.

Tom's eyes flickered with something that looked vaguely red, and he cursed Francis painfully. Francis tumbled out of his chair and shuddered with pain, waiting for the symptoms to subside. Tom watched until they did. He forced a smile, which turned out to look far more diabolical than even he had intended, and he took a few steps toward Francis. "Say it again," he hissed softly.

Francis started to reply, but suddenly became transfixed by Tom's eyes. "Holy--" he muttered. "Say--say what again?"

"Call me a Mudblood," Tom snapped, his eyes now almost completely red. "Tell me what you think of me, Francis... call me a worthless Muggle, an impurity, a disgrace to the name of wizard. You want to, don't you?"

Francis suddenly went so deathly and horribly pale that he looked like a ghost. "Riddle--Riddle, what are you doing?"

"I dare you to call me a Mudblood," Tom said, a rather demented grin on his face. "Come on, you've done it millions of times before. Do it once more. Call me Muggle scum... Mudblood. Two syllables. You can do *that*, can't you? Or are you too stupid?"

Francis, still twitching a little from the curse, backed away on his hands and knees, looking terrified. "Riddle," he squeaked. "Riddle, please--"

Tom's eyes narrowed. "I told you to do something, Malfoy," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "Are you going to do it?"

Francis started to mumble something, but he stopped. "I can't!" he cried helplessly.

"You can't?" Tom smirked. "Why?"

"You'll hurt me!" Francis chirped. "Riddle, your eyes, they're--"

"I may hurt you, that's true," said Tom evilly. "But I will definitely hurt you if you don't SAY IT!" Francis, looking miserable, crunched himself up into a ball and made a soft noise. Tom scoffed. "That the best you can manage?" He raised his wand threateningly.

Francis put up his hands defensively. "MUDBLOOD! MUBLOOD!" he cried, cowering and trying to protect himself. "Leave me the bloody hell alone, you evil git!"

Tom allowed himself a small smile. "I didn't know you had it in you, Francis," he purred. "You're braver than I thought. Now, do you want to know exactly who you're calling a Mudblood?" Francis whimpered, but Tom continued anyway. "Lord Voldemort. The last living descendant of Salazar Slytherin. As you can see, Francis, any *mud* in my blood is purified by the magical part of it. If anything, my blood is purer even than yours."

"You--you're related to...?" Francis stared at him in disbelief, then lowered his eyes. "I'll never do it again--My Lord," he added.

An odd shudder passed over Tom's face. Half of him was shrieking in pain, and the other was laughing hysterically. The red vanished from Tom's left eye, but remained in the right. Francis glanced up when Tom did not reply and saw that he looked extremely dizzy. It was perfectly understandable. Inside Tom's head, the two little voices were fighting like cats and dogs. The one

that seemed to be located on the left was pleading with the other one to stop whatever it was doing, and the one on the right was insulting the one on the left. Tom shut his eyes and put a hand to his forehead, leaning on a nearby chair for support, but the lightheaded feeling did not go away. The voices suddenly grew louder, and there was an unbearable searing, stabbing pain in the left half of Tom's brain. Then, nothing. Everything vanished without a trace.

"Riddle?" Francis asked uncertainly. Tom looked at him, and Francis noted with relief that both of his eyes had gone back to their old turquoise.

The taller boy nodded, flinching. "Leave me alone," he added sharply. Francis obeyed immediately and scrambled out of sight. Tom collapsed into the nearest armchair and pocketed his wand, blinking a few times. "That was... interesting," he said to no one in particular. With a weary sigh, he waved his hand, and the book he had been reading sailed over and landed open in his palm. Tom flipped back to the index and skimmed it, not really expecting to find much of anything. That is why, of course, it came as a great shock when he did. Right under the letter C was exactly what he had been searching for--a twelve-page entry on the Chamber of Secrets. A few pages beyond that was a shorter essay on "Slytherin, Heir of."

Eagerly, Tom opened to the right page and started reading avidly, taking notes as usual. When he turned to the passage about the Heir of Slytherin, however, his quill slipped out of his hand and his notes lay forgotten on the armrest.

Salazar Slytherin prophesied that his true Heir (and greatest descendant) would come to Hogwarts about a thousand years after his own death. He said that this Heir would have much in common with himself, and that the Heir would have to use the inherited talents and traits in order to find the Chamber of Secrets and control the monster. He wrote that his Heir must possess "serpentine qualities," which is believed to mean that the Heir must be a Parselmouth. Slytherin was unable to find any other Parselmouths even among his own children, but his true Heir, he wrote, "would be rather an embodiment of myself in a later time." The Heir would likely look like Slytherin, at least vaguely, and share many traits, "right down to the date of birth and quill hand." Also, based on Slytherin's description of the Heir in his prophecy, it appears highly likely that the child will be a member of either the Circle of Light or the Circle of Darkness.

Tom just sat there rather blankly, staring down at the passage. He then wondered how he could be so abysmally stupid as to not figure it out on his own. *He was the Heir of Slytherin*. When faced with the information, it suddenly seemed extremely obvious. Of course it was him. He was the last living relative of Slytherin himself, after all, and they did have a frightening number of things in common. Both Parselmouths, raised by Muggles, left-handed, Olwyns, haters of Muggles, adept at Seeing... the list went on and on. The passage was right, even their birthdays were the same.

This set Tom's mind to churning. He seized the pile of notes he had taken about the Chamber itself. He skimmed the notes and immediately began starting to put two and two together. If he had to be a Parselmouth to be Slytherin's Heir, it seemed extremely likely that he would have to use Parseltongue to get into the Chamber, perhaps even to control the monster. And if he needed to speak Parseltongue to get the monster to obey, it could only be one thing. A snake.

However, Care of Magical Creatures was not Tom's strong point. He had no idea what kind of snakes were monsters--except, of course, for the fact that some people thought all snakes were. Tom scratched his head. He knew nothing about magical creatures... but there was someone else who did. Making a decision, Tom stood up and ran up to his dormitory. Francis could be heard whimpering quietly into his pillow, but Tom ignored him bitterly. He threw open his trunk and dug around for his Invisibility Cloak, wincing a little as he remembered where he had got it. Tom forced himself to think of the matter at hand instead of Lili, and he threw the cloak about his

shoulders. That done, he quit the chamber and dashed down the stairs, leaving through the portrait hole.

He found Rubeus tending to Aragog in the dungeon, as he always did in the evenings. Tom watched for a few minutes, hidden by the Invisibility Cloak and by the shadows. Aragog had to be as tall as a man now, and Tom shuddered to think of getting too close to it. Taking off the cloak, he slowly said, "Good evening, Rubeus."

Rubeus jumped a full two feet into the air and whirled around wildly. When he saw Tom, he sighed with relief. "Tom... it's only you... I though' it was a professor..." Rubeus suddenly laughed. "Close enough," he chortled. "Here ter see Aragog, then, are yeh?"

"Get him away," the spider clicked ferociously, jerking an arm in Tom's direction. "He is not wanted here." Tom folded his arms and scowled darkly at Aragog, who only clicked more loudly.

"He's in a bit of a mood," Rubeus apologized. "Come on, Aragog, into yer box... Tha's it... Now le's go out inter the hallway and we can talk ou' there."

Tom agreed to this, and they left Aragog in his dungeon. "Rubeus," Tom asked in a would-be casual voice, "do you know any kind of magical creature in the form of a giant snake?"

Rubeus did not read into this, but he was clearly excited about the question. "Well, there're white anacondas... nasty li'l blighters those are, they can bite through anythin'. Then yeh've got yer Bavarian Snodwabbler--it c'n crush yeh in its coils in jus' a minute." Rubeus continued in this vein for quite some time, while Tom was mentally drawing conclusions. So far, none of the suggestions seemed to fit. All of them seemed too upfront, too aggressive. Tom thought the monster would have to reflect the traits of Slytherin House--sly, cunning, and discreet, yet venomous.

"...Las' one I can think of is the Welsh Basilisk," Rubeus was saying. "Really devilish, those. They can poison yeh ter death with their bite, either that or just meet eyes with yeh... if yeh look a basilisk square in the eye, yeh're dead as a doornail unless yeh're a born Parselmouth. An' no one's a Parselmouth, much less a born one, so yeh're basically jus' dead if yeh go anywhere near 'un."

Tom's heart must have skipped a few beats. It was perfect. It had to be a Welsh Basilisk. Everything fit--why, Salazar Slytherin had even lived in Wales, so getting his hands on one would have been far easier than some of the other snakes. Tom's spirits lifted. "Thank you, Rubeus," he said, his voice sounding almost cheerful.

"No problem... why'd yeh ask?"

"I was just curious," Tom said hurriedly. "I'm trying to write an extra credit report on all of the major magical snake breeds, you see, and I needed to know which names to look up." This was a relatively legitimate excuse, and even if it had not been, Tom was such a good liar that it would have come off perfectly anyway. Rubeus, of course, accepted this with a grin and hurried back to work with Aragog again.

Tom threw on the cloak once more and sneaked back up to his common room with a new spring in his step. As he reached the portrait of the wood nymph, however, he halted abruptly. If it *was* a basilisk, how on earth was the fifty-foot creature going to get around the school without being noticed?

"Go away!" Tom shouted furiously. "I don't need you!"

The Specter shot another painful curse at him, which sent him reeling. "You're right," the Specter hissed coolly. You don't need me. But Tom does. Don't you want Tom to be great?"

"I AM Tom," Tom yelled. The Specter tuttered, shaking its head.

"Not anymore," it mock-sighed. An evil grin spread across its flat face and he cursed Tom again, harder this time, and he fell over, doubled up with pain. The Specter bent over and looked Tom in the face. "Not going to fight back?" it whispered.

Tom shook his head violently. "Not going to stoop to your level," he snapped.

The Specter proceeded to laugh that hideous laugh it had. "Idiot boy," he snarled. "It's no wonder he's almost all mine now... you thought you'd dominate forever, didn't you? Well guess what, little boy, it's looking down now, isn't it? Foolish pacifist. CRUCIO!"

Tom felt every atom of his being explode with pain. Each cell underwent a fiery apocalypse; the serrated agony echoed throughout his body with the force of a charging dragon. "Let it end!" Tom thought miserably. "Oh, God, let it end..."

"Tom! TOM!"

Tom's eyelids fluttered open and he found himself staring into Adrian's horrified face. The other boy had been shaking his shoulders, trying to wake him, and he looked scared out of his wits. Beyond him was Zuhayr, who was shockingly pale in contrast to his usual swarthy complexion, and just behind him were Francis Malfoy and Richard Zabini, who looked afraid and repulsed. "Wha--?" Tom said dully.

"Tom... you were screaming in your sleep." Adrian's blue eyes were very wide. "You were yelling for help... I think you asked someone to leave you alone--" Adrian stopped short as the moonlight caught Tom's face.

"What is it?" Tom asked immediately.

Adrian was backing away slowly. "Zuhayr, get Madam Viola," he said sharply. Zuhayr, who had been staring in shock, did not need telling twice.

Wordlessly, Tom stood up next to his bed--and promptly felt a wave of nausea. His left leg did not seem to want to support his weight; in fact, it hurt horribly. With one knee shaking violently, Tom gradually made his way over to the mirror. If he had not been half-expecting it, he would have passed out. What he could see of his body was covered with lacerations, slits, and burns... but only on the left side. The right side was completely normal, aside from being more than a little paler than usual. He realized with a jolt that his left arm was broken in several places. And yet, his right side remained perfectly intact. Tom swore magnificently and grabbed onto a nearby bedside cabinet for more support. "Tell me I'm still dreaming," he said flatly.

The several minutes of dead silence that followed were interrupted as Madam Viola burst into the dormitory. "Dear God," she murmured, and shooed the other boys to the other side of the room. She immediately conjured a stretcher. "Just lie down on this, Mr. Riddle, everything's going to be fine." However, from the way she was panicking, Tom got the distinct impression that everything was not going to be fine. Madam Viola looked as though she had just encountered the devil; her face was sheet-white and she seemed to be resisting the urge to scream.

Tom obeyed her in a sort of daze, staring down at his hands. The contrast was bizarre. Madam Viola threw the doors open again and dashed down the stairs, the stretcher following her a few feet off the ground. Tom's right hand clenched around the side of the stretcher; he was not quite sure that it was immune to capsizing.

As they reached the hospital wing, Madam Viola magicked Tom onto a bed and promptly hustled off to find her case of potions. Tom tried his best not to look down at the mess on his left side, but it was so painful that it was hard to ignore. Every time he glanced down, he shuddered at the sight; he looked like either a leper or someone who had been exposed to intense radiation.

Madam Viola plunked down in the chair next to his bed and rather gingerly started to examine him. "It's only on the one side," she kept saying. "Dear God, dear God..."

"Am I going to die?" Tom asked, his voice breaking a little.

"No, you're not," Madam Viola insisted soothingly, though she still looked worried. After using her wand to mend his arm, she unscrewed a bottle of healing salve and began to apply it liberally to Tom's face. Tom tried not to cry out. Whenever one of the abrasions was touched it unleashed a howling demon of pain shooting along his nerve endings, and on top of that, the healing salve itself stung and burned. "Do you think you can put this on the rest of you?" Madam Viola asked, looking flustered. "I have to go look something up in my book."

"Of course," Tom winced, and started to fumble with the bottle of potion. Madam Viola ducked out of the compartment and left Tom trying to apply the potion and avoid looking at his skin at the same time. It was horrible--even if he did not look, there was still the pain, and the skin felt rough and bumpy under his fingers. It was almost like running his hand over a rock covered with barnacles.

After about ten minutes, Madam Viola re-entered, and to Tom's surprise, she was carrying a pendant with her. She placed it around Tom's neck without giving an explanation, and the thing instantly began to hum gently. Tom looked at it. It was carved from what had to be obsidian, apparently hollow in the middle, with a flaming light coming out of holes that had been bored into it. With every beat of Tom's heart, the light went from white to blue, then back to white again. "What's this?" he inquired curiously.

"It's called an Antidaimenus," she said swiftly.

"What do Antidaimenae do?" Tom demanded.

Madam Viola did not answer. Instead, she instructed him to lie back and try to get some sleep, tapped the Antidaimenus with her wand once (which appeared to do nothing whatsoever), and ducked out again. Still grimacing with pain, Tom let his head fall back onto the pillow and shut his eyes against the Antidaemenus's light. The humming was not grating at all, but soothing, and it eventually lulled him to sleep despite everything.

He woke up at about four o'clock in the morning to see firelight shining through the canvas. In the fulgent glow of the nurse's lantern, Tom could see two blurry shapes. One of them was short and plump--that had to be Madam Viola--and the other was tall and rather thin. "Are you sure it was a--" the stranger started to say, and Tom could tell from the voice that it was Professor Chapman.

"Positive," said Madam Viola softly. "He had all the symptoms... I gave him an Antidaimenus, of course, I just hope it will be enough."

"Well, it all fits," Chapman replied in a whisper. "Did anyone ever tell you why Medéa McGonagall came in a year ago? It was because the Ministry had heard about some other cases of this same ailment in a nearby village. She was doing some work with them. In any case, it seems that a lot of people are getting it now... the Dark Underworld is getting more active. Thank God we have Antidaimenae, otherwise we'd have to resort to the--er, old-fashioned forms of exorcism." Tom felt anger rise in his throat. They thought he was *possessed*?

"It--well, it could have been something else," Madam Viola admitted. "But he really had nearly all the symptoms--except, of course, it's usually the right side that's attacked. And he's acting normally, hasn't tried to kill anyone."

"As I recall, that is a crucial symptom," Chapman said dryly. "Of course, it's better safe than sorry, but... if it isn't a demonic possession... what else could it be?"

"Search me," Madam Viola sighed. "Maybe we should take this discussion to my office--I don't much like the idea of waking him, the poor boy." The lantern slowly bobbed out of sight, and there was a sudden, hissing voice.

"Masssster?" a snakelike voice asked softly. Tom turned his head painfully to the left and saw Nepenthe's face.

"Yes?"

"Masssster, I heard what happened from a dusssst ssssnake in your room. He ssssaid that you woke up sssscreeching and that--that--" Nepenthe's voice sounded dreadfully concerned, and he visibly shuddered. "You are looking better than the other ssssnake dessscribed you," he said, laughing nervously. "But Masssster, I came here to tell you ssssomething... The other ssssnakes have told me that the monssster is sssstill killing any ssssnakes who come near... and they ssssay that this monssster has been talking about an Heir coming for it..."

Tom would have sat up abruptly had he not been tied down by pain. "What?! I thought it was *Aragog* who was eating all the snakes!"

"No," said Nepenthe quietly. "It is another ssssnake. The other ssssnakes visit it to try and ssssee what it wantsss, but all of them are killed." Tom got a sudden mental picture of a set of snakes slithering through some sort of tunnel to go see a giant basilisk--and suddenly it clicked.

"THAT'S IT!" Tom cried. "Nepenthe, you're a genius! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Hush!" Nepenthe barked.

Tom calmed down, but in his mind, he was triumphant. *Pipes*. A giant snake could get around the school through the pipes. That had to be it. The only connections the main school had to the plumbing system were the bathrooms, which meant that the entrance had to be in a bathroom. Hogwarts had a moderate number of bathrooms, but a thorough search of each one would only take a few minutes.

Ignoring the pain coursing through his left side, Tom smiled slightly and settled back in bed. With a bit of luck, he would have discovered the Chamber of Secrets in less than a week.

21. Of Mirrors and Maladies

Tom woke up at seven o'clock the next evening with moonlight burning his eyes. Blinking rapidly, he sat up, aching a little but otherwise back to normal. The chain of the Antidaimenus felt cold against his skin, and as he looked down, he saw that the light it exuded was now a constant emerald green. He tried to yawn, but it made his face hurt. "Madam Viola?" he called tentatively.

Madam Viola poked her head in and promptly rushed over to Tom's side. Her attention went not to the remnants of his injuries, but to the Antidaimenus, whirring and humming at his chest placidly. She reached out and plucked it up in her hand, forgetting that the chain was still around his neck. "Oh my," she muttered, starting to walk away with it. Tom choked and tried to get the chain off of his neck. "But... you have all the signs... how can you not be--" She frowned down at it and tapped it with her wand.

"Madam Viola!" Tom wheezed, struggling to find a clasp. He soon discovered there was none.

"Just a moment, Mr. Riddle," she said absently.

I'm a trap door and a slipknot short of being hanged over here!"

Madam Viola glanced at him, then dropped the Antidaimenus. "Oh, Tom, I'm sorry, I was a bit distracted."

"I noticed," Tom said dryly, removing the pendant and cringing. "So what's the verdict? Am I possessed or not?"

Madam Viola did a classic double-take. "You heard--?"

"Yes," Tom replied, "your light woke me up. But that hardly matters. Did the little demon detector find anything or not?"

The nurse bit her lip. "Nothing," she responded. "Nothing at all."

Tom blinked, not exactly believing this. "Then... then what could it possibly have been?"

Madam Viola shifted uncomfortably, her eyes on the floor. "Professor Dumbledore is going to take a look at you," she said.

Tom narrowed his eyes. "Dumbledore? With all due respect to the man, what medical knowledge does he have?"

"A bit, I'm told, but it isn't the medicine he's concerned with right now. We're trying to find out what did that to you, if not a demon. You see, Albus Dumbledore has much experience in battling the Dark Arts, and only something affiliated with the Dark Arts could have--" Madam Viola broke off, wincing.

Tom sighed heavily. He was tired of the whole ordeal and would have preferred to avoid any sort of interaction and just drop it altogether. However, there was a certain finality in Madam Viola's voice, and Tom thought it best to go along with whatever she asked. He ate the breakfast she bestowed him in silence, his mind going over the night's events with a fine-toothed comb. He as good as knew where the Chamber of Secrets was, but was not about to let that preoccupy his mind right now. While he was obsessed with finding it, he thought that analyzing the dream (as

well as what came of it) was probably more important, and he squashed his obsession for the time being.

"May I have a sheet of parchment and a quill?" Tom asked the nurse, shoving his breakfast trey aside.

"Of course," Madam Viola replied distractedly, shuffling through the papers on her desk to find what he wanted. "Dumbledore will be here in about twenty minutes."

"Thank you," Tom said graciously, seizing the quill and parchment the instant they were within reach. When Madam Viola had exited his sleeping area, Tom flipped his trey over as a makeshift clipboard and smoothed the parchment out on top of it. Dipping the quill in the ink, Tom chewed on his lip as he wrote out vague outlines of all of his nightmares.

1. Hallway, Mirror (Look in mirror, see Specter)
2. Woods, Mirror (The Same)
3. Woods, Little boy with lightning cut (Specter in trees)
4. Hallway, Mirror (Specter in room, look at mirror, two sides), white room
5. Prison-like room (Specter performs Cruciatus Curse, etc)

Tom twirled the quill slightly and cocked his head. There was only one thing that remained consistent throughout the nightmares, and that was his Specter. And the Specter always tried to kill him--either that or convince the boy that he was not Tom, but somebody else. And somehow, Tom had got the impression that he *was* someone different the dreams about the white room and the cell. Come to think of it, in the last dream--the one with the cell--the Specter had even called him a "foolish pacifist." Tom was *anything* but a pacifist. Either the Specter was a tad bit daft, or Tom really was someone else in his dreams. He seemed even to take on another's personality.

Tom tried to work all of this out, but he soon found himself completely lost. He was not Freud, and even Freud would have had trouble finding a meaning for a dream such as this. Especially considering that the latest one had physically harmed its bearer. All Tom knew was that this had something to do with the headaches he'd been having, and the arguing voices in his head. Aside from that, he was in the dark.

He was jerked from his pensive state by a sharp knock on the metal frame of his curtain. Tom looked up immediately to see Professor Dumbledore, looking unusually grim. "Hello, Tom," he said, sounding rather like a psychiatrist greeting a patient. "You're looking better than you did last night."

"You saw me last night?" Tom asked suspiciously.

"Yes, of course. Madam Viola called me in the moment you dropped off." Dumbledore sat down in a chair at Tom's bedside. "What's that you're writing?" he asked.

"Nothing," Tom said quickly, shoving the paper into his pocket. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "It's just homework," Tom lied, though his humors were so poor that he was too weak to make it convincing.

Dumbledore continued to look at him suspiciously, but he said nothing more about it. "Tom, I'm going to run a few tests on you to see exactly what did that to you," he said quietly. "First off, have you ever had something like this happen before?"

"No," Tom responded, then rethought his answer. "Sort of," he clarified. "A while back--bloody hell, it had to be in my third year--I woke up thinking my shoulder was ripped open. Turns out it wasn't, but I could have sworn I felt blood."

Professor Dumbledore took note of this, looking as though this were the last thing he wanted to hear. "Any unusual dreams?"

Tom bit his lip. He wanted to be honest, but something in him was telling him that he should lie, just about the dreams. "No," Tom replied. This was without a doubt the most foolhardy lie he would ever tell, but he had no bolt from the blue to inform him of this. Dumbledore simply gave him a suspicious look and scribbled something on his notepad uncertainly. Tom's resolve faltered a bit, but he did nothing to correct the error.

Dumbledore had Tom answer a few more questions--minuscule and unimportant things. With every answer Tom gave, Dumbledore looked more and more preoccupied. Finally, he sighed and set his notepad down. "There's one other exercise I want to try out," he said. "I have a magical tool in storage which I think may point us in the right direction. I'll leave you alone long enough so you can change into your robes, and then we can go."

Professor Dumbledore ducked out and closed the curtains behind him, and Tom got out of bed painfully and changed into his school uniform. Once he had finished, he used his undamaged arm (the one on the right) to throw the curtains aside. Dumbledore was pacing, to Madam Viola's great annoyance, but he stopped when Tom walked out. "Are you ready?" he asked. "Good. Now, I want you to promise me you'll be totally truthful about everything, you understand me?"

"I will be," Tom exclaimed promptly. Dumbledore nodded and led Tom out into the corridor. After walking for a few minutes, they came upon a door Tom had never seen before. Dumbledore stopped there.

"Here, you go in by yourself," Dumbledore persuaded him, a pained look suddenly passing over his face. "I don't much feel like seeing Catherine again."

"Catherine?"

"My wife," Dumbledore said shortly, the pained look growing even more pronounced. "She's been dead for eight years."

"Then how could you...?" Tom started to ask, but he stopped, deciding that pursuing the subject further might provoke his teacher to actually cry. Still looking quite confused, Tom lifted the rusty iron latch, stepped into the room, and carefully closed the door behind him.

Turning around, Tom immediately discovered that the room was almost empty. There was a harp at one end of the room and a gilded mirror at the other. Inches of dust lay on the floor, as though no one had been in here for ages. Cobwebs hung from the walls, and the moonlight coming through the window caught the dust in the air in silvery shafts. Tom, who had always been a fast learner with any sort of musical instrument, plucked one of the strings on the harp and listened to the melodious sound this evoked. His heart turned over. No matter how prickly he was around people, Tom had a soft spot for music. He played a few more notes on the harp and chanced to look across the room, where the gilded mirror was facing him.

The reflection in it made him jump. It was almost as though he had double vision when he looked into it, but it depicted two different scenes that melded together, and bright colors flashed across the surface. Intrigued, Tom abandoned the harp and went up to examine the mirror. It was well-made, with gold rims and clawed feet. Carved along the top was a curly-lettered inscription, which Tom read with difficulty. *Erised stra ebru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.* Tom frowned. The words were in no language he had ever seen before--but there was something about them that made sense. Once again squinting to make out the letters through the obstacles of darkness and need of reading glasses, Tom read the message backwards. *I show not your face but your heart's desire.* So that was what Dumbledore had meant--he did not want to look in the mirror and see his dead wife again.

Tom looked down at the squiggly reflection once more. This was his heart's desire? It was his life's goal to live in a place with bright flashing colors and swirling lines? And yet, he got the impression that he was seeing double. He covered his right eye. Abruptly, the image on the mirror morphed. It showed Tom, but he looked different--less pale, more cheerful. He was talking to two people. Tom's stomach tightened. He knew those people. Lili and Hannah. Seeing them again was agony. His mother was sitting next to him, and, to Tom's amazement, his father was there too, except he and Tom's mother seemed to be getting along. Tom felt a pang somewhere around his chest and he pressed his hand to the mirror. The shadows took no notice of him. Instead of the warmth of their love, Tom felt only the numbingly cold surface of the glass.

Uncovering his eye, Tom released a breath he had not known himself to be holding. From the way his heart was wailing, that was certainly his heart's desire. Simply out of curiosity, Tom covered his left eye, so that he was looking at the mirror through his right. What he saw was so utterly different from the first scene that he gasped in shock. There he was, but much older, about twenty-six, and he somehow did not look quite right. He was wearing black robes, rather more elaborate than the simple Hogwarts uniform and made of velvet instead of wool-cotton. He had got a bit taller, a tad thinner, and much paler, but he still retained his characteristic good looks. The older version of Tom was standing on top of a craggy hillside in what looked like the kind of weather one usually experienced in Scotland (dreary and grey), his wand in his left hand. A smooth white tragedy mask was clutched in the right. The Tom-who-was-not-quite-Tom was surrounded by men in dark hooded cloaks, black robes, and masks, all of whom were speaking to him with bowed heads.

Tom thought hard. That probably meant his other heart's desire was to be admired, a leader. The mask, however, he could not understand at all. All he knew was that it terrified him, and it was this that made the whole scene seem frightfully wrong. Beginning to feel uneasy, Tom took his hand away from his left eye.

The scene remained the same.

A state of sudden and inexplicable panic overcame him. Tom rubbed his eyes frantically, trying to convince himself he was seeing things. When he opened his eyes again, the mirror had gone back to its old swirl of color. Tom sighed with relief, though he could not have told himself exactly why he felt relieved. He covered his right eye and saw the people he loved once more, but when he uncovered the eye, it went back to the nonsensical swirl. Tom had no idea what to make of it. Feeling uncomfortable again, he quit the chamber.

He nearly collided with Professor Dumbledore, having been too distracted to remember that the teacher was even there. Tom blinked a few times in the torchlight, chewing on his lip. "Well?" Dumbledore prompted. "What did you see when you looked in the mirror?"

Tom was torn once again. Part of him told him to tell the whole truth--in fact, it was almost begging him to. On the other hand, the other part of him invoked him to make up some falsehood. Tom was leaning toward the former voice, but he heard mendacity flow from his lips before he could do anything to prevent it. "I saw myself as Head Boy," Tom heard himself say, an intangible shrug lilting at his voice. A sudden, vague pain twinged in his left side, but Tom ignored it.

Professor Dumbledore looked both confused and disturbed. "That's your heart's desire?" he asked slowly, looking as though he expected more than that.

Tom was possessed by the sudden urge to yell the truth, but he heard his voice cheerfully reply, "Yep." That inexplicable panic he had felt in the Mirror Room returned with a jolt.

Dumbledore bit his lip. "Nothing about Lili, then?" he asked gently.

Tom struggled to get the words out, but his body and voice did not seem to be in his control. The nasty little voice in his mind was laden with schadenfreude when it once again seized command of his vocal cords and said, "Not that I know of. She could be somewhere in the background, but I didn't see her."

"SHUT UP!" the other voice shot back--except the bad side had finally backed down, and Tom accidentally said these words out loud. He clapped a hand over his mouth, but the damage had been done.

Professor Dumbledore's light blue eyes flashed with concern, and he stared at Tom unblinkingly. "Tom, what just happened?" he asked urgently.

"I--I don't know!" Tom murmured through his hand, falling back against the wall and sliding to the floor. Inside, he was in tumult--the voices were going mad, fighting violently and hurling insults so noisily that Tom could barely hear anything else. "God, be quiet," he whispered, but this only provoked the voices to start yelling more loudly to drown him out.

Dumbledore, too alarmed to bother with being gentle, grabbed Tom's shoulders and shook him roughly. "TOM!" he shouted. "Tom, tell me what's the matter!"

Tom could not reply. He was near tears by now. Through the shouting, the small smidgen of his mind that remained unified spoke through as the voice of sanity. "Why is this happening?" Tom whispered, hugging his knees to his chest as he used to when he was young. "Why me? Make them stop, please make them stop..."

After a few agonizing minutes, the voices died down, and Tom looked up from his hands to see Dumbledore before him, face contorted. "Are you all right now?" he asked tentatively.

Tom winced and nodded, a sharp, stabbing headache radiating from somewhere around his left ear. "I want to go back to the common room," he said blankly, rubbing his forehead. "Don't test me anymore, *please!*"

Dumbledore said nothing, and Tom got to his feet after a few moments. The professor did nothing to stop him when Tom raced off in the direction of the Slytherin commons. Dumbledore got to his feet, staring after his student with a mixture of worry and dismay. "If only you didn't lie so often, Tom, I might be able to help you," he thought grimly. He turned around and slowly made his way back to his own office.

22. The Heir of Slytherin

Tom sank heavily into a high-backed armchair, still shaking, his breathing coming in short, sharp bursts. Shivering, he folded his arms across his chest, ignoring the curious stares of the other Slytherins. His head was spinning, his mind a jumble of senseless words and pictures. The voices had essentially died down, though snippets of angry conversation still flew around his head. Tom released a breath slowly and forced calm into his panicking mind, trying to ignore the vertigo he was feeling. "Just shut up and calm down," he instructed his brain firmly. "You'll figure out what's wrong, don't worry about it. Just think."

Slowly, he managed to assuage the panic coursing through his veins, until all that remained was a dull, throbbing worry lingering at the back of his mind. But try as he might, he could not begin to think what had happened. He knew he was capable of figuring this out, he *knew* it. There was some kind of mental block preventing him from getting much further than "my brain isn't working right." Tom sighed heavily and gazed into the fire as though searching for some sort of aid within the blaze. His eyes wandered up to the mantelpiece, falling upon the emblem of Slytherin House carved in marble above the fireplace.

"Chamber of Secrets," Tom thought dully, feeling more weary than ever. All of a sudden, the whole thing seemed so *trivial*. What did he care about Slytherin's monster? How could he even be sure it existed? He had too much on his mind to bother with it.

"Then again," one of his voices offered reasonably, "brooding over this isn't going to help. Maybe you should try and clear your mind--forget about the whole Specter nonsense for a while. It might do you some good. Ignoring it might even make it go away." Tom tried to find some sense in this statement. The voice tried a different tack. "Maybe all this has been happening because you've been taking too long finding the Chamber," it added slyly.

Tom went rigid.

The voice fell silent. Its lies were told, and its job was done.

Tom had never spent more time hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak than he did that evening. Starting at about eight o'clock and continuing indefinitely, he had been dashing around the school, checking the faucets of every washroom he came upon. The past four or five hours had gone by in an incoherent haze punctuated with only a few bursts of emotion--dull disappointment whenever a likely find proved moot, and a more prominent explosion when a few whispered words in Parseltongue finally rang true.

In any case, as the boy stood at the end of the Chamber and stared up at the impossibly tall pillars, he had only a vague idea of how he had come to be here. His mind was a numb tangle, and he preferred it to be so--if he thought too hard about what he was doing, he might end up reconsidering. The Invisibility Cloak was folded liquidity, grasped tightly in his right hand, while his wand was clenched in the left. Only two emotions managed to fight their way through the miasma. Apprehension lay to his left, eagerness to his right, mingling into a heavily intangible cape about his shoulders. By now he had merely an indistinct idea why he had come--vengeance. Just who or what he was avenging, was debatable. Even he was not sure anymore.

"You've come this far," his brain said impatiently. "Go on, then, get it over with."

Tom absently strode amongst the towering columns, eyes riveted on the other end of the Chamber. There was a rather inaccurately rendered statue standing at the very end, one Tom supposed represented his ancestor. Reaching it, and still seeing no sign of life, Tom went on instinct and looked up at the statue. "Where do I look next?" he asked quietly in Parseltongue.

In response, the statue's mouth opened. Tom stumbled backward slightly as there emerged from the chamber behind the statue a twenty-foot, poison green serpent, the likes of which had not been seen for centuries. It turned its great yellow eyes on him, and Tom felt a wave of mild dizziness. "*You came for me...*" the basilisk hissed.

Tom nodded, the feeling of delirious anxiety starting to fade.

"*What may I do, Master?*" the basilisk demanded, its poisonously silky voice weaving its way through the heavy air.

"Serve your purpose," Tom replied. For the first time in his life, his voice bore a slightly haughty lilt. "To kill Mudbloods." Half of Tom's mind lurched into nausea as the word passed his lips, but he ignored it, as he had grown accustomed to doing.

"*Your commands are my Scripture,*" the basilisk said smoothly. "*I have the gift of detecting murky blood. It will work to your advantage. When am I to begin?*"

"Immediately." Tom's eyes glimmered faintly red. "If you'll follow me." He spun on his heel and strode off, hearing the basilisk's heavy slithering following close behind. A whispered serpentine command brought the doors open, and as they reached the mouth of the pipe, Tom halted and allowed the basilisk to catch up.

"*You are to sit on my back,*" the basilisk invoked, "*and I will take care of the transportation.*"

Tom obeyed mutely, sitting where the basilisk's shoulders would be and anchoring himself in place by wrapping his arms around its neck. The serpent made sure he was secure, and then it made its way up the pipe.

The ride was unpleasant, to say the least--At least when he had been on his way down, Tom had been going too quickly to see the slime on the walls. Whereas, the basilisk moved at a leisurely pace, and Tom had ample time to take in his surroundings. The stalagmites of pond scum in the walls were making him feel ill. When they finally exited the pipe, Tom immediately leapt off the basilisk's back and tried to remove the slime from his robes with a Scouring Charm. "*Where to?*" the basilisk demanded impatiently.

"Do you smell any Mudbloods nearby?" Tom asked.

"Yes," the basilisk replied.

"Then we're going there," Tom said. "Lead the way."

The basilisk had been born to obey, so it obeyed. The serpent slithered from the lavatory door and made its way through the hallways, Tom close behind.

Courtney Gunther sighed heavily, folding her arms across her chest. She stood with her back to the wall, her blue-grey eyes staring down the corridor. Naturally, she had got stuck with hall patrol on the coldest night in months. There was a kind of chill to the air that seemed almost unearthly--but Courtney was a sensible girl, she had never believed in Divination.

And yet...

"And yet what?" she asked herself tiredly. "I feel like something bad is going to happen, that's what. It doesn't mean anything. Precognition is impossible."

Courtney could imagine how that Riddle boy would react to this. "You're such a Ravenclaw," he would say. Courtney frowned. She had only known Riddle through her friend, Lili Po, and had never really understood what Lili saw in the boy. Courtney could not stand people who teased, and Tom certainly teased. Besides, he was an avid believer in Divination, another of Courtney's peeves.

Courtney tucked a lock of dark brown hair behind her ear and continued to stare, feeling both frigid and bored. She saw little point in the prefects' hall patrol--very rarely were any children out of bed, and if one ever was, it was usually some Hufflepuff first-year who had forgotten that the common room had a bathroom and wanted the loo. She had no idea what the teachers thought would happen in the dead of night--it wasn't as though anyone really dangerous was attending Hogwarts. Obnoxious, yes. Dangerous? No, of course not...

There was a sudden noise down at the other end of the hallway, one that made Courtney jump. She spun around, eyes like saucers--only to find the hallway completely devoid of life. All she saw was a ghost at the end of the hallway, the Fat Friar. Courtney did not notice that the Hufflepuff ghost had a look of shock on his face, or that he had gone dark and cloudy--she was too preoccupied to pay attention to details. Sighing again, Courtney turned her attention to the floor. She noted, dully, that there was a smudge of spaghetti sauce on her prefect badge--probably from dinner.

Courtney unpinned the silver badge and started cleaning it off with the sleeve of her robe. She thought she heard that soft slithering noise again, but assumed it was the Fat Friar.

When she removed the cloth, she saw two bulbous yellow eyes reflected in the badge. After that, nothing.

Despite his late night, Tom was early to breakfast the next morning. He stumbled into the Great Hall at six-thirty and collapsed into a chair at the Slytherin table, his overwrought psyche weighing on him like a ball and chain. He had not experienced so eventful a thirty-six hour period since he had run away from the orphanage to Little Hangleton. However, everything about the Specter was shoved from his mind by the sadistic excitement about what would happen when that Ravenclaw girl was found. Tom knew he had failed to kill her, but any harm to a Muggle-born was a reward for him.

"Good God, have you no decency?" one of his voices demanded sharply. "What's happened to you, Tom? You've turned into a complete--"

"Quiet, you," the other voice shot back.

"What would Lili think if she saw you now?" the first voice asked shrewdly.

Tom's stomach turned over and he suddenly felt a surge of painful guilt. The latter voice began to panic. "Tom, he's playing the dead-best-friend card now! Do you really want to listen to him?"

"Good point," Tom mumbled, and he went back to his ham and omelet as though nothing had happened.

At seven o'clock there was a sudden scream in a nearby hallway, and all of the early birds in the Great Hall fell silent. A red-haired second-year burst through the double doors in a few moments, her eyes wide with shock. "Courtney's dead! Courtney's dead!" she shrieked madly. "The Fat Friar's gone smoky and Courtney's dead!"

The teachers stared at the little girl in confusion, but to Tom's unease, it was Dumbledore to stand up first. "Everyone stay in here," he commanded sharply, and there was such a look of fury on his face that nobody dared disobey.

Over the next months, Tom started feeling like a serpent-tongued Jack the Ripper. He would steal off to the Chamber of Secrets during his break times and ask the basilisk to find a solitary Mudblood. For the first two weeks, he was unsuccessful, until he managed to corner a first-year Ravenclaw girl, Jessie Davies, on a Saturday afternoon. She had been scuttling around on her hands and knees out in the hallway, examining the floor with a magnifying glass. Tom supposed she had been looking for any evidence left by the Heir of Slytherin--little children were like that. In any case, she had seen the basilisk only through the magnifying glass, so she had been Petrified rather than killed. Tom decided against pretending to stumble on her body, for any attention drawn to him would put him in danger.

With this in mind, Tom suddenly stopped talking much in class. He raised his hand less often, and did his work quietly. If anyone noticed this, it was Dumbledore--Dumbledore noticed everything. But nobody else did. The school had been turned upside-down over the sudden attacks, so everyone was distraught. After the first attack, Dippet ordered the prefects (Tom included) to take turns roaming the hallways at night.

By the third week, there had been two more attacks, both on Gryffindor boys--Joseph Forman, a fifth-year, and Louis Orion, a second-year. They had been sitting together in their common room, chatting, and they saw the basilisk reflected in the mirror above the mantelpiece. The Headmaster was in a panic--all he knew to do in this situation was up the number of prefects in the hallways, which clearly did not work. Thus, Dippet did virtually nothing.

Dozens of students, mostly in Ravenclaw, had noticed that all four victims were Muggle-borns, and had figured out that the Chamber of Secrets was no joke. Michelle Field of Hufflepuff started telling wild stories, claiming to have seen the monster that was attacking everyone ("...a hundred feet tall, with great blunt teeth and wild black fur--wings like a hippogriff, and a lion's head, too, with *big purple eyes...*"). A few of the Gryffindors decided to use the situation to their advantage, so they started something of a Gryffindor Mafia--selling cheap "protectors" to the more gullible first-years for an exorbitant amount of money, and using the whole Heir of Slytherin legend as an excuse for attacking random Slytherins.

Tom watched all this in his quiet way, that ever-present nasty half of him reveling in their fear while the oppressed better half cowered in a corner and moaned. As the attacks continued, as Tom watched the school panic at his hand, the rend between his two personalities widened. His nightmares slowly increased.

He had next to no idea who was a Muggle-born and who was not--he relied on the basilisk to tell him. "Mudbloods turn up in the strangest places," Tom often thought. Not long after the double attack in the Gryffindor common room, Tom made another double attack during the Christmas Dance. He did not enjoy this attack much--the Muggle-borns the basilisk directed him to, Abby Forrey and Robert Aberson, were to be found snogging behind an evergreen tree in back of the school. They saw the basilisk through the fog, so, to Tom's disappointment, they only ended up

Petrified. The professors who discovered them had quite a time prying them apart--but it was an essential action, as otherwise the two Hufflepuffs would have been laughed off the face of the earth by any student who caught a glimpse of them in the infirmary.

Tom's luck with the attacks seemed to go in this direction at all times. Two months later, the next victim, a fourth-year Gryffindor named Jacob Waters, lived up to his name perfectly--he had happened to be carrying a full aquarium of fish down to the Care of Magical Creatures teacher's office. After that, a second year named Nikhil Abjeru (yet another Gryffindor) was up in the Astronomy Tower late at night doing some stargazing. When he had heard the basilisk hiss he had spun around, telescope and all, and seen the basilisk through it.

Sprinkled throughout this were several visits to the small barn down on the grounds. Tom had read in a book somewhere that the cry of a rooster was fatal to a basilisk, so in order to ensure his success, he went down to the barn once every two or three nights. Tom had never known himself to be so good at strangling things, but apparently it was another one of his talents. Once all the adult roosters were dead, Tom checked up regularly to kill all of the male chicks as well. Somehow, one chick's death caused more guilt in him than all his attacks combined--something in him felt dirty about killing something that had barely had a chance to live. Whenever the school tried to buy a new rooster, Tom would have to kill that one, too. He kept finding rooster feathers in his bedsheets, and once in a while he even found a fluffy little yellow one (after which he usually felt horrible).

His next human attack came late in May. As he did every Wednesday, Tom had to go through the corridors and, basically, look for himself. Heir of Slytherin or not, he was still a prefect, and had to fulfill his duties as one. Tom yawned--to him, this was a complete waste of time. He *knew* who was attacking everyone, and he knew just as well that that person was not going to pull anything like that now.

That is, unless that person was getting extremely bored. And that person *was* getting extremely bored.

"Great way to get rid of ennui," one of his voices snapped sarcastically. "Go kill a few Muggle-borns, THAT'S the way to go!"

"It is indeed," Tom thought. He yawned again and pulled his cloak tighter around him. Trying to look casual in case he met up with any other prefects, Tom changed direction and made his way toward the washroom. Whenever he passed a prefect, Tom's throat would clench like a fist, and he would nod in greeting so as not to seem too suspicious. One or two were not easy to get away from--Molly Robbins and Marina Edwards of Gryffindor both wanted to chat. Tom managed to make some pretty convincing excuses, and it was always a relief to him when the other prefects walked away.

When Tom finally reached his destination, he cast a quick eye around the deserted hallway before proceeding. He counted taps until he found the right one, bent over, and started to speak.

A sudden creak behind him made him jump, and whirl around in surprise. Myrtle Potter was standing in a stall, a pout on her abysmally freckled face. "This is a *girl's* toilet," she whined. "You're a boy."

"No, really?" Tom muttered. "Look, Myrtle, I'm also a prefect. I'm told to inspect where I think there might be people snooping around. I heard you sniveling in here." This was a flat-out lie, but Myrtle's startling him had put him in a panicky sort of foul temper, and it made him feel better to hurt her feelings. "Five points from Hufflepuff. Get to bed, Myrtle."

Myrtle huffed. "I don't know what's stopping me from going and ratting you out to my cousin for being so mean to me," she snuffled.

For whatever reason, the thought of Nathan Potter angry with him made Tom feel jittery. "Better make it fifteen more points from Hufflepuff," Tom added nastily. "And don't let me catch you in here again after curfew, understand me?"

"Slytherin scum," Myrtle mumbled, and she hied out of the lavatory before Tom could even think about going for his wand.

Once she was out of sight, Tom blinked a few times. "That was mean of you," he said to himself flatly. Naturally, part of him found this incredibly amusing. Rather than ponder it further, Tom turned back to the faucet. "Open," he said impatiently. Once the sink had disappeared, Tom called down into the void, "Oy, basilisk, I'm up here!" Within ten seconds, the serpent had slid out of the pipe, looking groggy and irritable.

"I was sleeping," it hissed petulantly.

"Do I look like I care?" Tom shot back rhetorically. Inside, he kicked himself--why was he being so nasty with everyone? "Come on." Tom opened the door an inch and looked outside before opening all the way. The basilisk followed him out silently. After a few empty hallways, Tom got too comfortable and rounded the corner into the Trophy Room without looking. When he saw that it was not empty as the other places had been, he stopped dead. "Stop!" he whispered fiercely to the basilisk.

"Oh, hi, Tom!" Nathan smiled, looking up from his book. He had been leaning against the inside wall of an alcove, reading, and his thick glasses made his eyes look enormous in the firelight. It suddenly struck Tom that Nathan looked very much like that little green-eyed boy in one of his earlier nightmares. The resemblance made him shudder. "How's life been treating you?" the Hufflepuff asked pleasantly, closing the volume and placing it in his pocket.

"Well enough, considering," Tom replied, cleverly masking the anxiety in his voice. "You?"

Nathan's face fell. "I don't know how to feel about it," he sighed. "I mean, I try to look at everything and see something good in it--" (Tom resisted the urge to gag) "--but this whole Chamber of Secrets thing, I don't know..."

"Bad business, that," Tom mock-sighed.

"Yeah... I'm not worried for me, I'm worried for Myrtle," Nathan said uneasily. "I mean, we're both Muggle-born, but Myrtle's also very nearly a Squib, so the way I see it she's doubly at risk."

"I've never heard of a Muggle-born Squib..." Tom thought dryly. On the outside, he forced his voice to sound tremulous and fearful. "I'm worried about it too," he said faux-scrupulously, "my dad was a Muggle, so..."

"I don't know, he's not attacked half-bloods yet," Nathan reasoned. ("Won't, either," Tom added to himself.) "But still, good to have your guard up."

"I'm amazed all the Mud--Muggle-borns at the school haven't packed up and left," Tom mused aloud. Nathan laughed.

"Can't let the bastards win, can we?" he chuckled. Then he frowned, serious once more. "Ethnic purity... what a load of tripe... whoever this Heir is, he needs to take a look at the recent events

in Germany. How much you want to bet that ten years from now the little bigot has loads of followers, all chanting 'Heil' before his name?"

Tom felt the ground lurch under his feet. Nathan was comparing him to *Hitler*? Newspaper headlines and Muggle newsreels swam in his head like black-and-white flounders. He had always been outspoken against that inhuman creature... "I'm not like him, of course I'm not... don't pay any attention..." Tom thought, shutting his eyes against the wash of agonizing nausea.

"I'd not bet on it, we'll catch him before then," Tom replied, trying to inject some confidence into his wavering voice. "Well, I'd best get back to my patrol, Nathan--see you around."

"You too," the other prefect responded with a smile. Tom exited the Trophy Room and nearly tripped right into the basilisk, which was sitting in a coil outside the door.

"*Mudblood!*" the basilisk hissed eagerly, and before Tom could protest, it had shot past him and gone right into the Trophy Room. Tom rushed in after it.

"Stop it, you idiot, what the hell are you thinking?!" Tom snapped. The basilisk stopped dead, its bared fangs scarcely two inches away from Nathan's prone body. Tom irritably brushed past the snake and gave Nathan the once-over. His eyes were open, and his chest was rising and falling gently, as though he were asleep. From his position, Tom could tell he had been looking at one of the metal trophies when he was attacked, and his Coke-bottle specs lay smashed on the floor. Tom felt a sudden and irrational burst of panic. He had never had any intention of attacking either Potter, for some reason--something in him had always told him never to go near them with a ten-foot pole.

"Go back to the Chamber," Tom invoked the basilisk quietly. "Go alone. If someone catches you, I don't really care."

"But Master--"

"Get OUT, I said!" Tom snapped, spinning around to glare at the serpent. It drew back slightly--Tom's eyes had obtained that scarlet glint, and the basilisk's instincts told it that the boy was not a force to be reckoned with.

"Yes, Master," it said meekly, and slithered off into the night.

Tom was left staring down at Nathan's peacefully prone figure, a look of confusion and helplessness on his face. He had no idea why he was so disturbed, which aggravated him further. He was possessed by a mad urge to do *something*. Just what, he had not the foggiest. And then, louder and clearer than ever, a voice drifted to the top of his mind.

"Kill him."

"What?!" Tom asked, feeling even more nauseated at the idea.

"Kill him. You have your wand right here. Kill him."

Tom blinked. "Why? I--I wasn't even supposed to attack him--"

"KILL THE POTTER!" the voice shrieked. "BEWARE THE CERAMIST! BEWARE THE EVE OF HALLOWS! KILL THE POTTER! KILL HIM!"

Eyes wide and horrified, Tom backed out of the Trophy Room, eyes riveted to Nathan's open, glassy ones.

"KILL HIM! DON'T RUN AWAY! KILL HIM!"

"I can't," Tom whispered, and he broke into a run. The voice screamed in his ears, but he managed to ignore it for the moment. He did not stop running until he reached his usual watch area near the Ravenclaw common room.

It was the first of June.

"I wonder if they have a name for today," Myrtle thought dully. "I mean, we have April Fool's Day and May Day... why isn't there a June Day? Probably because it's my birthday..."

Myrtle sat petulantly on the toilet lid, tears rolling down her face. "Stupid Olive Hornby," she sniffled, blowing her nose loudly into a handkerchief. She was half-amazed Olive had the gall to make fun of her--after all, Myrtle's cousin had been attacked a few days ago. But, Myrtle thought, Slytherins were all in favor of killing off Muggle-borns, so naturally the girl would want to aggravate the situation. Myrtle frowned. All Slytherins were awful, in her eyes.

Even Tom Riddle was being mean to her now--Tom who had listened to her troubles without complaint all through her first year and part of her second. Myrtle frowned. "Then his bratty little Chinese girlfriend died on him," she muttered. "Then he had to go and get all mopey..."

Myrtle sniffled again. She seemed to be doing a lot of agonizing over Slytherins lately--one in particular. Myrtle frowned. She had come to hide in here to whine to herself about Olive, and here she was thinking about *him* again. Pathetic.

"I wonder if he realizes half the school's in love with him," Myrtle mused, shooting a few sparks from her wand. Probably not, he was not particularly astute in that department. Though how he could have missed it, Myrtle had no idea--whenever he stepped into a hallway the giggling got so loud it sounded like the corridor was full of busy bees. Myrtle sighed. Someday he *would* figure it out... then he'd realize he could have any girl he wanted, and what were the chances of him picking *her*? Myrtle started crying again--it was what she did best. It never made her feel any better, but no matter--Myrtle loved moping and crying made her mope the best.

Myrtle heard someone enter the bathroom. Oh, great. It was probably that dratted Olive Hornby again, come to make fun of her specs some more. Myrtle pulled her knees up to her chest so Olive would not know she was there. However, the shoes she saw crossing the floor could not have belonged to Olive Hornby--Olive wore shiny blue Mary-Janes every day. These were rough, dull black leather, with coarse black laces, and they were barely visible in the swirl of black robes. The stride was quick and light, and Myrtle could tell the person was in a hurry. Whoever-it-was stopped before one of the faucets.

The stranger proceeded to utter a series of quick, soft, coldly beautiful words in some language Myrtle did not understand. The voice was low, quiet, and frank--Myrtle should have recognized it, but she did not. "That's a *boy* talking!" she thought, disgusted. She ignored the odd whirring noise coming from the outside. Myrtle stood up huffily and threw the door open. "What are you doing in here?" she started to snap, but she halted at the first syllable. Everything was a wash of yellow and black, and Myrtle suddenly felt very light. She thought she heard someone swear, but thought nothing of it--all that mattered was that this felt rather nice, despite the fact she felt vaguely like she was suffocating. Though she thought she was still standing, she heard something hit the ground with a thud.

Looking down, she saw it was her own body.

23. Of Serpents and Spiders

The seconds after Myrtle opened the door seemed to go in slow-motion. Tom swore softly and looked down at the third-year girl. The first thing that came to mind was a chubby, freckle-faced, bespectacled Ophelia, lying flat on her back in the middle of the flagged stone floor. "Oh God," he murmured. "Oh God, oh God, oh *God*..."

"Wrong Potter, you moron," the first voice said irritably.

Meanwhile, his other voice was in a frenzy. "Never thought you'd actually end up killing one of them, *did* you?" it was scolding. "Guess it doesn't feel quite like you thought it would, *does* it, Tom? Exit number four--what's to stop you from killing a fifth person? And a sixth, and a seventh? You don't like the way this feels, do you?"

Tom had to admit he did not. Lord, he did not. Somehow it had escaped him just how it felt to look down at a body, to taste death upon the air, and to know that he had put an end to a person's existence. How had he been remembering it? Euphoria? Pathetic--his nastier half had probably conjured the illusion. Tom had completely forgotten the shock, the horror, the unbearable guilt. All he had recalled was a ruthless sort of exhilaration, but now he remembered it was nothing like that at all.

"This was an *accident*," Tom murmured to himself in a panic. "You didn't mean to kill her... No, you meant to kill someone else, and that's just as bad, you idiot! Oh God..."

And then it suddenly hit him. Nathan Potter was not dead. And when he was revived, he would find out his cousin had died.

"Can't be caught in the area," Tom thought vaguely, though his mind's voice was drowned out and abstracted by the shards of incoherent emotion jamming themselves into his brain like scalpels. Something in him was shouting that he deserved to rot in Azkaban, while the other, panicking, was prompting him to get out of the area, and fast. Shivering slightly, Tom hoisted Myrtle into a sitting position and sat her on the toilet lid like some ghastly doll on a shelf.

"*May I make a lunch of her?*" the basilisk asked tentatively.

"No," Tom whispered numbly, only half-aware of what he was saying. "Go down to the Chamber, we are done for today." With a hiss of disappointment, the basilisk vanished into the pipe, and the sink slid back into place the instant its tail flicked out of sight. Eyes still wide with horror, Tom backed away a few paces, spun on his heel, and broke into a run.

Tom collided head-on with Mandy Birch as he burst through the portrait hole into the common room--she had been running in the opposite direction. Tom was thankful Francis was nowhere about, for he and Mandy had landed in a heap, and the position they were in could have looked quite wrong in Francis's eyes. "Damn it... sorry, Mandy," Tom muttered, though he hardly had to bother--Mandy did not seem to mind at all, to put it mildly.

"It's okay, Tom," Mandy replied pleasantly, not doing a thing to help Tom extricate himself from the rather awkward position. She seemed to be rather liking it, herself, which made Tom feel slightly ill.

Tom gave a nervous laugh. "Right, okay... can you, er, get off me?"

"You're in a big hurry to leave," Mandy commented in her most coquettish voice, not budging an inch. "What's the rush?"

"I left my book in the dormitory," Tom lied through clenched teeth. "And I need to go get it now. So can you get off?"

Mandy did not move. She only grinned at him.

"Mandy," he announced slowly, still grimacing with pain, "if you don't get up *now*, or at least move your knee some, in a few seconds I'll be useless as an organism." Mandy pouted slightly and scrambled to her feet. Tom got up as well, wincing. "Thank you," he said sardonically. "If you'll excuse me." He strode off in the direction of the boys' staircase, but slowed when he saw she was following him.

"I'll come with you if that's all right with you," Mandy said sweetly. "I'll... help you find that book."

Tom's mind went blank for a few seconds, and then, two words drifted to his consciousness. "Oh, *yuck*."

"No thanks, Mandy, I can take care of it myself," Tom retorted promptly. He started up the stairs, but was exasperated to hear her footsteps following him again. Tom wondered briefly where everyone was, but he remembered that it was a Hogsmeade weekend. "What are you doing here in the first place?" he demanded, whirling around. "Oh God," he thought, "please don't say you were waiting for me..."

"Just... ahh... well, waiting for you, actually," Mandy smiled. "I thought you might be able to... you know... help me with my homework." ("YUCK, YUCK, YUCK!" Tom thought, gagging.) "You sure you don't need any help finding that book? I'm really good at finding things."

Tom was feeling something very near nausea by now. "I'm *fine*," he insisted, and he stormed up the staircase, slamming the door behind him before Mandy could follow. "Slut," he muttered, somewhat comforted to know that both of his voices seemed to be in agreement on this issue.

With that distraction out of the way, Tom was able to fully concentrate on what had happened. Myrtle Potter was dead--the very creature he had been told to protect. And he had, however unwillingly, been the one to kill her. Tom swallowed hard. "It was an accident," he told his conscience desperately, "Oh God, I didn't mean to kill her, it was an accident..."

"Wrong God-damned Potter," one of the voices kept muttering.

Tom spent four agonizing hours locked away in the dormitory, either pacing restlessly or sitting at the foot of his bed and flipping unseeingly through books. The image kept replaying in his mind, and every time it did, Tom felt a lurch of panic. He knew that none of the evidence pointed to him, but the possibility of Nathan finding out seemed far from remote to him. He worried over the Ministry, the teachers, but all those thoughts shot from his mind whenever it occurred to him that Nathan might find out.

After four hours, Tom was a veritable wreck. He had failed to convince himself it was an accident--failed to assure his own innocence. He could not sit still by now, and was pacing like an animal in a cage. Dully, he noticed noises down in the common room--the other children were returning from Hogsmeade. The axe would fall any moment now--some girl would find Myrtle soon, and it all would come out.

"Never again," Tom murmured to himself. "Leave the bloody basilisk in the Chamber and wait for the next Heir to deal with it..." One side of his mind howled in protest, but for once Tom did not listen. He knew, now, that he had been an idiot even start with this Chamber of Secrets

nonsense. He realized that he did not care about punishing Muggles enough to resort to murdering innocent people--if he wanted to punish Muggles, he'd do it directly. Tom was not even sure he could stand any sort of murder. Based on the way his heart was going, the way his breath seemed to catch in his chest, he would do well to abandon the habit completely. Part of him did not seem to mind murder at all, but the other half went into shock.

Tom stopped pacing as he heard footfalls on the staircase. Zuhayr Sahabjira (who, Tom remembered vaguely, he had once considered to be his best friend) burst through the door, smiling cheerfully. "Hey, Tom," he said warmly, plunking into a chair. "You really should have come to Hogsmeade," he commented. Tom's face drained of color, and Zuhayr, remembering, suddenly flinched. Tom had avoided Hogsmeade ever since his first and only visit--going there reminded him, and horribly, of Lili's death.

"It doesn't interest me," Tom said softly.

"Yeh... er... sorry..." Zuhayr grimaced. "What have you been up to? Reading?"

"Rather," Tom said evasively. He was itching to start pacing again--sitting still was driving him mad. "I hope you enjoyed yourself."

Zuhayr flinched. "I suppose I did--Tom, are you feeling all right?"

"Why do you ask?" Tom demanded ferociously.

"Well, you just... you look a little pale, is all," Zuhayr confessed, looking at Tom warily.

"Don't I always," Tom said flatly--it was more of a statement than a question. "Do you know what time it is?"

Zuhayr checked his watch. "Supper's in fifteen minutes."

Tom nodded, emotion barely registering in his pallid face. "I suppose I ought to head down to the Great Hall. You can come along if you like."

Zuhayr cringed a little. "I think I'll stay here," he said, and he sat down at a desk, pretending to do his homework. Tom spun around and quit the chamber, feeling rather numb. His old best friend was blatantly terrified of him--when had that come about? Of course, he reminded himself bitterly, Zuhayr's fears actually might have a base to them. Maybe he, Tom, deserved to be feared.

Tom wearily tramped down to the Great Hall and sat down at the Slytherin table. Dumbledore shot him a half-smile, and Tom forced himself to smile in response, though he was suddenly gripped by a lurch of panic. Oh God. Dumbledore would know... Dumbledore always knew. Tom spun hurriedly to stare at his plate, but the damage had been done--Dumbledore would already know he was guilty when Myrtle's body was eventually found. Tom wondered briefly if he ought to have allowed the basilisk to eat her, but realized that would have made matters infinitely worse.

The Great Hall gradually filled up with students and teachers. Tom glanced around at everyone--some students praying silently, others digging in. It suddenly struck him how very many lives there were in the world--the census people said it was somewhere around four or five billion. And yet, of all of them, he was one of the select few murderers. It was an odd sensation--he abruptly felt very greatly outnumbered. One of his voices--God knows which one--started taunting him, snapping about how he might one day drastically lower the population if he kept it up. Tom wished, irritably, that just for a moment those two stupid voices would shut up.

Tom picked at his food, spinning the gilded fork and occasionally plunging it into the pile of rice. He watched the professors warily--Dumbledore was talking animatedly to Chapman, Xavier was laughing at a joke told by Flitwick, Twiddly was chatting warmly with Sevigny. Tom frowned. Where was Dippet? He glanced around the Great Hall again. Dippet was conversing rather urgently with a group of Hufflepuffs. Tom saw a couple Hufflepuffs shaking their heads, and another one of them clapped her hands over her mouth, her eyes widening. A third-year pointed at the Slytherin table rather accusingly, and Dippet hustled over importantly.

He halted in front of Olive Hornby, who happened to be sitting a few seats away from Tom. "Miss Hornby," he croaked, in the most authoritative tone he could muster.

Olive shook her ginger-colored bangs out of her eyes and glared up at Dippet irritably. "What?" she asked.

"Miss Hornby, some of the Hufflepuffs tell me that you were teasing Myrtle Potter earlier. Is that true?"

Olive pouted. "And if I was?" she demanded. Tom cringed--he knew what was going to happen, it was inevitable.

"Do you know where she might have run off to?" Dippet asked frantically. "The Hufflepuffs say she hasn't been seen for over four hours."

"Whiny little tosspot," Olive muttered, the words hinted with a cockney accent. "I think I know. What do you want me to do about it, eh?"

"I want you to go get her for me," Dippet instructed. "Please, it's important."

Olive scoffed. "Whatever," she sneered. Tom watched as she stood up sharply and made her exit.

A sinking feeling tore through Tom's chest. He was not sure what he had hoped to happen--for Myrtle never to be found, perhaps, or for something else to happen to draw the attention away from her death. So far, nothing--no atomic bomb or Dark wizard attack provided salvation. Shivering, Tom resumed his mutilation of his dinner.

There was, of course, the scream--the Slytherin girl came running into the Great Hall, literally crying bloody murder. Tom did his best to look earnestly shocked and horrified, and he pulled it off quite nicely. The whole school was on its feet at once--Dumbledore and Madam Viola, presuming it to be another, regular attack, got up as usual and strode out of the Hall. Dippet ordered everyone to their seats, his eyes lingering on the Slytherin table. "Calm down, everyone," he insisted, "no one's been murdered--Miss Hornby, *do* calm yourself--"

"Her eyes were shut!" Olive wailed. "She wasn't breathing at all and her face was blue and her head was all bloody and she's dead, she's dead, she's *dead!*" A Muggle-born Ravenclaw suggested having Olive breathe into a paper bag, but Dippet did not listen. He forced Olive to sit down and had Chapman run down to the Potions classroom to get a Soothing Draught for her. Tom watched it all, grimacing, and paled when Dumbledore suddenly burst through the door.

"Go back to your common rooms," he commanded. Dumbledore's blue eyes were flaming with anger, and Tom felt himself choke as the older wizard gave him a long, penetrating stare. "There has been another attack. Your Head of House will be in later to explain the circumstances. You will finish dinner in your common rooms. You are dismissed."

Tom stood up, glancing over at the circle of teachers, wondering if he dared pose the question. Deciding it was worth the risk, he pushed through the crowd and made his way over to them.

"...school might have to be shut down," Professor Twiddly was saying frantically. "Albus, what are we--"

Tom took a deep breath and plucked Dumbledore's sleeve. When he turned around to face him, Tom immediately wished he had not--he had thought those eyes looked furious from a distance; it was amazing how much angrier he looked close-up. "Professor?" he asked timidly. "Do you know if the Headmaster ever received the letter I sent--" Tom broke off promptly, as Dumbledore's eyes flared.

"Don't you understand?" he snapped. "A student has *died*, Mr. Riddle! Hogwarts is facing complete shutdown! This is *no* time to worry about the *post!* *Is that understood?*"

Tom felt the little color in his face fade out. The way Dumbledore was looking at him made him want to run away and not stop until he reached Edinburgh. He heard one of the Professors chastise Dumbledore for losing his temper, claiming that Tom could not possibly have known, but Tom completely ignored it. Eyes wide and terrified, feeling extraordinarily foolish for bringing it up, Tom backed away into the crowd and broke into a run once Dumbledore could not see him.

If there was a word for the combination of agony and ennui, Tom would have used it to describe the first part of next day.

After a sleepless night, Tom rose at four in the morning and spent the next three hours pacing the common room. When Professors Chapman and Xavier turned up with breakfast, Tom took merely a slice of toast and headed back up to the deserted dormitory. Too tired to resume pacing, Tom sat on his bed and whipped the drapes shut, conjuring an orb of fire to hover at the foot of the bed and light the place up. After a few hours of staring at the pattern on his quilt, Tom made a valiant attempt at reading but could find nothing that interested him. Nepenthe was off exploring, as usual--Tom swore that cobra knew the place inside and out. But Tom really would have preferred it if Nepenthe were there--he had turned into one of the few creatures Tom could actually talk to comfortably. So Tom remained entombed in the canopy, doing absolutely nothing except alternating between emotional strife and utter boredom. Eventually, he fell into an uneasy slumber.

He woke up some hours later to someone shaking his shoulder. Tom blinked blearily up at the intruder, cringing against the bright orange sunset streaming in from the gap in the curtains. After a few moments, Tom realized it was Professor Twiddly shaking his shoulder. "Tom?" she said patiently. "Tom, wake up, dear."

"It's not morning," Tom said dully.

"I know--Tom, Professor Dippet wants to speak with you."

Tom felt a sudden lurch of panic. "He what?!" he demanded, rather too sharply.

Twiddly put a finger to her lips to silence him. "I'd suggest you smarten yourself up a bit--put on any prefect badges you have, straighten up your robes."

"What does he want?" Tom asked, slightly suspiciously.

Twiddly shrugged. "I don't know, he didn't tell me. Anyway, he's in his office, waiting for you--I presume you know your way? The password to his office is 'March Hare'!"

Tom nodded, running a hand through his hair. He did his best to remove any sign of nervousness in his voice. "I'll be there as soon as I can," he informed her. Professor Twiddly nodded and exited the dormitory.

So they'd found him out. Tom immediately thought of Dumbledore--he would have accused him straight away, he was sure of it. Tom miserably brushed the wrinkles out of his robes and pinned his prefect badge to his chest. He thought desperately of some kind of alibi, but because he was not sure exactly what they were accusing him of, he could not think of one. He promised himself that he would do a good job of making it up on the spot, though he abhorred doing that.

"Relax," something in him invoked, as Tom began panicking again. "Dippet might not even want to talk about Myrtle--it could be something to do with your marks or something." However, Tom seriously doubted it--what else would the Headmaster want to talk to him for?

Tugging a pointed hat onto his head for good measure, Tom made his way down the staircase. The two seventh-year prefects at the portrait hole did not flinch as Tom passed them--apparently they had been instructed to let him by. Tom meandered toward Dippet's office, going over excuses in his head. "I was in the library!"..."Myrtle who?"..."Why would I be in a girls' lavatory?" All of them sounded horrible and unconvincing in his head.

Feeling distinctly worried by the time he reached the top of the spiral staircase, Tom hesitated before knocking on the door. He straightened his robes again, adjusted his badge, and rapped his knuckles on the maple.

"Enter," came Dippet's wispy voice.

Tom twisted the doorknob and stepped inside, taking off his hat nervously. Dippet looked up at him, setting down a vaguely familiar-looking sheet of parchment. He smiled congenially, which did nothing to ease Tom's nerves. "Ah, Riddle," Dippet sighed heavily.

"You wanted to see me, Professor Dippet?" Tom asked shakily, picking at a loose thread on the rim of his hat. He glanced all around the room, chewing heavily on his lower lip.

"Sit down," Dippet prompted, indicating a chair in front of his desk. "I've just been reading the letter you sent me."

Tom's first inclination was to say, "What letter?" But then he remembered--in the early morning yesterday he had sent a letter to Professor Dippet, asking to stay the summer. It seemed so far in the past. Reassurance hit him hard in the back of the head like a two-by-four. Numb with relief, Tom only managed to squeak out the syllable, "Oh." He sat down in the chair, interlacing his tapered fingers very tightly. He looked up at Dippet, who glanced at the letter again.

"My dear boy," Dippet said slowly, "I cannot possibly let you stay at school over the summer." Tom's briefly elated heart plummeted like a stone. "Surely you want to go home for the holidays?"

Tom felt a wave of revulsion at the idea. "No," he said, promptly and firmly. "I'd much rather stay at Hogwarts than go back to that--to that--" Tom choked on his words, unable even to say it.

Dippet frowned curiously. "You live in a Muggle orphanage during the holidays, I believe?" he asked Tom, giving him a pensive look.

Tom reddened, half in embarrassment and half in anger at the memory. "Yes, sir," he said through gritted teeth.

Dippet took off his glasses and chewed on the right earpiece thoughtfully. "You are Muggle-born?"

Tom flinched almost undetectably. "Half-blood, sir," he corrected. "Muggle father,--" (here Tom shuddered slightly) "--witch mother."

Dippet cocked his head. "And are both your parents--?"

Tom was about to say yes, but he checked himself. "My mother died just after I was born, sir," he recited, in the voice of a tale oft-told. "They told me at the--at the orphanage she lived just long enough to name me--Tom after my father,--" (another shudder) "--Marvolo after my grandfather." Tom strategically left his father out of it completely, hoping Dippet would not ask. He did not; he merely clicked his tongue in that annoyingly sympathetic way he was prone to doing.

"The thing is, Tom," he sighed wearily, "special arrangements might have been made for you, but in the current circumstances..." Dippet trailed off and started shining his specs on his handkerchief.

"You mean all these attacks, sir?" Tom asked hopelessly. It looked like he had no hope of staying at Hogwarts now.

"Precisely," Dippet responded heavily. "My dear boy, you must see how foolish it would be of me to allow you to remain at the castle when term ends. Particularly in light of the recent tragedy... the death of that poor little girl... You will be safer by far at your orphanage." ("I wouldn't bet on it," Tom thought darkly.) "As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Magic is even now talking about closing the school." Tom felt his stomach plunge. The feeling of hopelessness grew even more profound. If they closed the school--that meant he'd be stuck at the orphanage, surrounded by whiny younger children and brutal caretakers. He'd finish school in Muggle high school, of all places, and end up a complete social outcast, a nobody. His eyes widened, and he looked up at Dippet. Dippet went on. "We are no nearer locating the--er--source of all this unpleasantness..."

Tom was thinking fast. He had already resolved never to open the Chamber again, but they had no way of knowing this... but if he framed someone--if he placed the blame on another's shoulders--he would save Hogwarts. It was horrible, he knew, but how was he going to get out of the situation any other way? "Sir--" he said slowly, not sure whether to allow himself to say it. "If the person was caught--if it all stopped--"

Dippet sat up as though he had been electrocuted. "What do you mean?" he demanded, his voice cracking. "Riddle, do you mean you know something about these attacks?"

"No, sir," Tom said hurriedly. Dippet fell back in his chair limply, looking even more like a rag doll than ever.

"You may go, Tom," he said vaguely. Tom stood up slowly and strode out of the room, ruining the exit by tripping on his shoelaces as he reached the door.

Tom rushed down the spiral staircase, not slowing up until he stepped out into the hallway. Staring avidly at the gargoyle, Tom bit his lip. How could he possibly frame someone? No one else was a Parselmouth--and how likely was it that there was some other kind of monster roaming the school? Some other disproportionately sized creature of the night?...

Eureka.

Rubeus--Rubeus had Aragog. Tom's conscience screamed in anger, but what other choice did he have? Tom weighed his options. He was fond of Rubeus--indeed, he was one of the only real friends he had. Rubeus was the only one in the whole school who knew about Tom's pseudonym--something only Lili Po had known about before. How could he just shunt the blame on his friend?

But then again, if Tom had learned anything from that orphanage it was that one always had to think of his own needs before those of other people. It was the only way to survive--and what was more important in the long run, Rubeus or Hogwarts? Tom sighed. Thinking hard, he remembered that Rubeus always checked on Aragog at about seven--that was in thirty minutes. He was not supposed to leave his common room, but Rubeus always managed to find a way out. Finally making a decision and ignoring the bickering voices in his brain, Tom set off down the corridors. The entrance to the dungeons was in the entrance hall, he remembered. Tom hied in that direction, dashing down the stone steps. He was just crossing over to the dungeon entrance when a voice rang out.

"What are you doing, wandering around this late, Tom?" Dumbledore demanded sternly. Tom halted abruptly and spun around, the usual fight-or-flight instinct tugging at him. Dumbledore looked much more subdued than he had the previous night--certainly not about to lose his temper.

"I had to see the Headmaster, sir," Tom said quietly, doing his best to sound passive.

Dumbledore nodded, fixing Tom in one of those slow, calculating stares. "Well, hurry off to bed," he said. "Best not to roam the corridors these days. Not since..." He trailed off, and Tom shifted uncomfortably. Dumbledore recovered himself after a moment, sighing. "Good night, Mr. Riddle," he said.

"Good evening, Professor," Tom replied, and he released a breath with relief as Dumbledore disappeared up the stairs. Once Dumbledore's dark violet cloak whipped around the corner, Tom looked around to make sure no one was looking and dashed off toward the dungeons. He took the stairs three at a time, and once he had reached level flooring he ran nimbly down the dank corridor to the deserted Potions room. He left the door ever-so-slightly ajar, his eyes riveted to the passage outside, darkness sweeping around him like a vampire's cloak.

It must have been a good twenty minutes that he stood there, turquoise eyes widened and ears perked. Somehow, he got the distinct impression he was not alone in the dungeon, even though he knew for a fact that it was empty. He found himself constantly attempting not to shudder at the odd feeling that he was being watched.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he heard hurried, heavy footfalls. Someone in a dark brown cloak swept past the Potions dungeon. Tom waited ten seconds before following, noiselessly as a cat. For several minutes, he sneaked after Rubeus, meandering through the maze of dungeon passages. Tom noticed the floor was starting to slope downward--at some point or other, Rubeus must have moved Aragog to one of the deeper, more secluded cupboards.

Tom heard Rubeus halt and push a door open, cursing hoarsely as it squeaked on its hinges. Rubeus set something down heavily and started whispering to his pet. Tom edged forward until he was right at the corner, his head inclined so that he could hear better.

"What do you mean?" a click-laden voice demanded angrily. "I cannot leave this place--it is all I have!"

"I know, I know," Rubeus said soothingly. "But they might find yeh--'s not smart to jes' keep yeh here anymore. They might even think yeh're the monster what's been attackin' everyone..."

"I most certainly am not!" Aragog rustled, clucking his pincers.

Rubeus made a sound of exasperation. "C'mon," he rumbled. "Gotta get yeh outta here... come on now... in the box..."

Tom leapt lightly and soundlessly around the corner. It appeared that Rubeus had been carrying a gigantic box--probably not quite large enough for Aragog, but sufficient. Rubeus was sitting on his knees in front of the open cupboard, trying to coax Aragog to get into the crate. Aragog was being uncooperative, clinging to the sides of the cupboard obstinately. When Tom entered the corridor, he suddenly started clicking and squawking incoherently.

"Aragog? 'Smatter with yeh--?"

"Evening, Rubeus," Tom said loudly.

Rubeus, panicking, stuffed Aragog back into his cupboard and slammed the door, hard. He spun around, eyes wide, but a look of relief washed over his face when he saw it was his friend. "What yer doin' down here, Tom?" he asked quizzically, laying a hand on the cupboard door to keep Aragog from throwing it open.

Tom took a step forward, his left hand on his wand under his cloak. "It's all over," he said in his most earnest voice. Rubeus looked perplexed. "I'm going to have to turn you in, Rubeus. They're talking about closing Hogwarts if the attacks don't stop."

"What d'yeh--" Rubeus started, but his eyes flitted over to the cupboard and the color drained from his usually ruddy face. "Oh no. Tom--"

"I don't think you meant to kill anyone," Tom continued. His voice was kindly and patient, though inside his conscience was screaming at him to stop. "But monsters don't make very good pets. I suppose you just let it out for exercise and--"

"It never killed no one!" Rubeus insisted desperately. The look of betrayal on his face made Tom shudder.

Tom stood his ground--he had come this far, he could not back out now. "Come on, Rubeus," he said quietly, stepping forward. "The dead girl's parents will be here by tomorrow. The least Hogwarts can do is make sure that the thing that killed their daughter is slaughtered..." Tom winced vaguely as Rubeus's eyes widened.

"It wasn't him!" he gasped, straight-backing himself against the cupboard door defensively. "He wouldn't! He never!"

Tom felt an unfamiliar sensation behind his eyes--was he *crying*? "Stand aside," he said fiercely, injecting venom into his voice to mask the pain. Rubeus did not budge, even as Tom drew out his wand. "*Portus Apertus*," he whispered.

Tom's regret was instantaneous. He had not realized that his spell, in conjunction with Aragog's insistence on being released, would have such a drastic effect. Aragog burst forth from the cupboard, clicking angrily and barreling right in Tom's direction. Tom was aware of a massive arm hitting him hard in the chest. Winded, he stumbled backward and landed on the floor, clutching his chest and gasping. The world was black for a few terrifying moments, and when Tom finally managed to get to his feet, the spider was almost around the corner. Tom raised his

wand again angrily, Unforgivable Curses itching to tumble from his mouth, but within a split second he was on the floor once more. Rubeus had pounced on him from behind, thrown his wand aside, and knocked him into the floor again. Tom's vision failed him again for a few moments, and he felt a sudden, searing pain across his forehead.

"Run, Aragog!" he called after the giant spider. Tom, his head spinning, tried vainly to sit up. Rubeus, in a fury, seized Tom roughly by the shoulder and slammed him against the wall. Once again, Tom's vision blacked--though, to his terror, it was not so quick to return. "What the hell were yeh doin'?!" Rubeus demanded, his palm grinding Tom's shoulder into the stone of the wall. "Tom, what the bloody hell's the matter with yeh?"

"Rubeus, I'm *sorry!*" Tom shouted. Blearily remembering his alias, he continued. "Rubeus, I know you didn't mean to hurt anyone, but--"

"It wasn't him!" Rubeus insisted. Tom still could not see what was going on, but he thought he felt something warm and sticky rolling down the back of his neck. "Yeh know it jes' as well as I do, Tom, Aragog wouldn't hurt no one! Yeh're jes' jumpin' ter conclusions 'cause Aragog never liked yeh!"

Tom was--infuriatingly--in tears by now, and only half because of the pain. "Rubeus, I had to do it! I don't want anyone to die! It's not my fault, please--"

Rubeus finally let go of him, and Tom, too weak to hold himself up, slumped against the wall. "Yeh can't turn me in!" he snapped. "Tom, yeh know I'd never--"

"I know," Tom sighed absently, alibi nearly forgotten in the throes of semi-delirium. "It was all an accident... didn't kill anyone on purpose... no one's fault but the monster's..." Even through the fog in his mind, Tom felt beastly. He heard Rubeus "tuh" loudly, and just as he was saying something about Aragog not being a monster, someone stepped around the corner.

"What's going on here?" the Professor asked. It was the very last voice Tom wanted to hear right then--kind of the gods to send him the one teacher he actually feared. "Mr. Riddle, are you all right?"

Tom blinked unseeingly a few times and slipped out of consciousness.

24. Rosemary for Remembrance, Pansies for Thoughts

"Tom? Tom, can you hear me?"

"Huh?" Tom said blearily, blinking into the too-bright swirl of colors and shapes. Things started to come together after a few moments, and Professor Xavier's concerned face swam into view. "Where am I?" Tom asked, vaguely aware of the clichéd nature of the inquiry.

Xavier suddenly looked intensely relieved. "Thank *God*, we thought we'd lost you for a while there!"

"Ow," Tom responded weakly. "Where am I?" he repeated.

"You're in the infirmary," Xavier said impatiently. "Tom, how's your head feeling?"

Tom grimaced. "Beastly." He put a hand to his stinging forehead and felt a raised bump under his fingers. "I think I'm okay, though..." Past events came rushing at him suddenly, and he sat up with a start, making his head swim. "Rubeus!" he yelled.

"Calm down, calm down," Xavier insisted. "Rubeus is currently being questioned by the Headmaster and the Deputy Headmaster, not to mention the Minister of Magic himself. He'll be properly punished for what he's done, to be sure."

Tom felt his stomach lurch. "And Ara--the monster?"

"It's vanished into the woods," Xavier sighed. "Perhaps it's better this way, though--the creature will be nothing without its master."

Relief and guilt, like a swirl of black and white, tightened around Tom's shoulders. He felt himself cringe by reflex, but thankfully his teacher did not notice. "That's good," he said faintly. "I hope the attacks will all stop now... I hope I caught the right person..."

"Of course you did!" Xavier exclaimed brightly. "All the evidence points toward Mr. Hagrid's guilt, Tom, you needn't worry about that. With some luck he might be expelled before the week is--"

There was a sudden bang as the infirmary door flew open, slamming hard against the wall inside. Tom looked sharply in the direction of the noise, and he saw the last duo he would have liked to see at that point--Dumbledore and Rubeus. They were closely followed by Dippet and a dark-haired young man in plain brown robes. Tom knew the young man by sight--it was Dolan Clarence, the Minister of Magic. Tom had actually spoken to him directly following Lili's death--the Minister had turned up to give Tom his condolences. Besides, Mr. Clarence was constantly appearing in the Daily Prophet, and it was hard for any witch or wizard not to know what he looked like. His hair was dark brown and wavy, and his eyes were warm hazel. He was a very kind and earnest-looking person, and seemed both too young and too honest to be a politician.

"Mr. Riddle?" Dippet squeaked, flopping into a chair in his Raggedy-Ann fashion. "We'd like to have a word with you, if you feel up to it."

"I guess so," Tom said flatly. He blatantly ignored the vicious look Rubeus was giving him.

Dumbledore nodded. His eyes downcast and his brow furrowed, he seemed more taciturn, and more dangerous, than he ever had appeared before. "Raphael," he said to Professor Xavier, "I would like you to remain, but considering the circumstances..."

"I'm on my way out already," Xavier nodded. He got to his feet and quit the chamber without another word. Tom watched him go, then turned his attention to the three men and the boy in front of him. Mr. Clarence was twisting his gloves in his fists nervously.

"Tom," he said gently, "I need you to recount, in detail, what happened last night and what led you to your discovery."

Tom repeated his alibi, going slowly so that he was sure he made no mistakes. When he had finished, Rubeus was pointedly looking away from him, and the two teachers were having a heated, whispered argument. Mr. Clarence looked pensive, and he kept looking from Tom to Rubeus with a perplexed look on his face. "You say he's attacked ten people, Armando?" he asked Dippet slowly.

Dippet broke away from the argument and nodded briskly. "And one of them is dead," he said.

The Minister of Magic bit his lip, glancing at Rubeus again. "He's just a boy," he sighed. "A mere child, Armando. Do you really think Azkaban's the right choice?"

Tom's eyes widened, and he whirled around to look at Rubeus. It set his nerves to shrieking, but he hardly cared. Rubeus gave Tom a bitter glare.

"I do indeed," Dippet started to say, but Dumbledore cut him off with a look.

"*Don't* send him to Azkaban," Tom commanded, in such an authoritative voice that it made everyone jump. "I already told you, he never bloody meant to kill anyone. It wasn't his fault--all he did wrong was take in that monster as a pet."

Something flitted across Rubeus's face, an odd mixture of gratitude and anger.

"You're saying, then, that he is not to be held accountable for his own actions?" Dippet asked him, frowning.

"Should you hang a man if his dog bites you?" Tom responded flatly. Rubeus grimaced and turned to face the window, resentment flickering in his eyes.

"I won't authorize his admittance to Azkaban," Mr. Clarence said after a moment. "My best advice is to expel him and leave it at that. I agree with Mr. Riddle."

Tom breathed a heavy sigh of relief. No matter what happened now, the loss of Rubeus's soul was not on his hands. He watched absently as the Minister of Magic took his leave, and then turned his eyes toward the two professors once more. They were conversing in low tones, every few seconds glancing up at either Rubeus or Tom. Finally, they stopped talking. Dippet turned to Rubeus.

"As of now you are officially expelled from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," he spat. "We shall perform the proper ceremonies later. But, against my better judgement, Professor Dumbledore has requested that you remain at Hogwarts and train with Ogg to become the next Keeper of the Keys."

Rubeus bowed his head, giving Tom a slow, heavy-lidded glaze before facing Dippet again. "All righ'," he sighed. "'S long as I can stay a' Hogwarts." He hesitated. "I suppose yeh'll be wantin' me wand, then."

"Indeed. The procedure is to transpire before the school at supper this evening." Tom lifted his voice in protest, but Dumbledore silenced him. Dippet continued. "Enjoy your last three hours of being a Hogwarts student, Mr. Hagrid," he uttered spitefully. "Get back to my office."

Rubeus heaved a sigh, folded his arms over his chest, and slouched out of the room, managing to look much smaller than his actual height.

Dippet smiled congenially, acting as though this whole thing was merely a trifle. "As for you, Mr. Riddle," he said kindly.

Tom narrowed his eyes. "Don't you think it's bad enough you're expelling him?" he said softly. Dumbledore shot him a look to try and silence him, but for once, Tom ignored it. "With all due respect, sir, isn't it a bit... unkind... to embarrass him before the entire school?"

Dippet gave Tom one of those obnoxious smiles that adults bestow upon children they believe to be unintelligent. "Tom, perhaps you do not understand exactly *what* Mr. Hagrid has done. He's possessed a forbidden creature, attacked nine students, and murdered another, not to mention his physical attack on you yourself." His tone was slow and condescending, as though explaining that one and one made two.

Had Dippet been about seventy years younger and had a shy less power, Tom would have hexed him. "And?" Tom said quietly.

"And, Mr. Riddle, he deserves the humiliation as part of his punishment." Dippet allowed his amiable smile to return to his face, though there was method behind the beam. "You know, Tom, you've done a great thing, catching the monster's master and all that." Tom was not sure how to react. Dumbledore coughed. "But, as you well know, if word of this gets out, I'll have parents at my doors demanding how I could have let a murderer get by so easily."

"So, keep my trap shut," Tom finished gracelessly. "What reason have I to do that?"

This was clearly the exact reaction Dippet had been waiting for. "Perhaps," he said slowly, "a Special Award for Services to the School--and the subsequent guaranteed entry to a prestigious wizarding postgraduate school--would work well enough?"

Tom wondered waspishly if Dippet's solution for every problem was doling out awards. How he wanted to turn Dippet down, and then go off and blab about everything... Dippet deserved the marred reputation for the humiliation he caused Rubeus. It would be a perfect eye-for-an-eye situation. However, he reasoned, he *could* use the postgraduate education; and while the Honor roll might get him in, this award could be a guarantee. He was torn between his two greatest values--taking revenge and taking advantage. After a few moments, self-gain won over sadism. "I guess so," Tom said flatly.

Dippet rubbed his hands together as though in glee. "Great," he said warmly. "Madam Viola informs me that you'll be able to attend supper this evening, so we'll make the announcements at that point in time. Congratulations on your award."

Tom muttered a forced thank you and took to examining the tartan pattern on his comforter. Sensing that Tom was in no mood to talk, Dippet nodded awkwardly and sidled out. Tom pointedly avoided Dumbledore's eyes, part of him desperately curious as to whether his teacher believed him or not. Tom glanced up at Dumbledore fearfully, and saw that the professor was staring at him intently, clearly thinking hard.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Tom asked quietly. Dumbledore was jerked from his reverie, and he blinked a few times.

"There are no flaws in your story," he said slowly. "Except, of course, that it's utterly impossible that Rubeus Hagrid is the Heir of Slytherin."

Tom forced a curious frown. "You don't mean to say you actually *believe* those old stories? My suspicion is that he just found the creature out in the woods and decided to keep it."

Dumbledore looked at Tom tiredly. "Believe it or not, Tom, I *do* believe those old stories," he said quietly. He hesitated. "Tom, if you ever need to talk about anything--anything at all--you know where my office is. Even if you just feel like you have too much on your mind and need to talk to somebody, by all means, I might be able to help."

"Er... okay," Tom said nervously. "Is it all right if I go back to sleep now, Professor?"

Dumbledore nodded vaguely. "I'll ask Madam Viola to rouse you for dinner," he commented absently. "Good day, Tom." With that, Dumbledore left the room in a swirl of blue cloak.

Tom fell back onto his pillow, sighing heavily. It took him a good half an hour to get even remotely close to sleeping.

Approximately three hours later, Tom was seated in the Great Hall, staring down at the deep green tablecloth and feeling thoroughly depressed. Madam Viola had mended his wounds as best she could, and all that remained was a jagged, thin gash going across his forehead that was adequately covered by his thick black bangs. His fellow Slytherins sat all around him, quite unaware of what was going on. There was, of course, a buzz going around the Hall about something special having happened, though it was quite obvious that no one had any clue as to what.

Once everyone was seated, the doors at the other end of the hall flew open, and Dippet strutted out of them. He waved his wand to magically magnify his rickety voice, and, with a flourish, stepped up so that he was standing at the very center of the empty staff table. "Good evening," he boomed. The chatter quieted within an instant. "It is a well-known maxim that good things come in threes. Well, to be sure, three good things have happened within the last thirty-six hours."

"The fact Myrtle's dead must be one of them," Tom heard someone snicker. He flinched.

"The first good thing," Dippet continued, "is that Professor Chapman completed the Mandrake Draught, and the Petrified students are with us again!"

Hearing their cue, the nine students trooped out of the back room. All of them looked cheerful except for Nathan--Tom supposed he had been told of his cousin's demise. There was an unruly standing ovation, though Francis Malfoy and Philip Cedric did not even applaud.

"The second good thing," Dippet roared, "is that the person responsible for all the attacks has been caught. The monster has been disposed of, and its master is to be expelled presently." The hall fell suddenly and deathly quiet as Rubeus emerged from the back room. Tom chewed on his lower lip as he noticed that Rubeus was in tears. As Dippet snapped the wand into eight small pieces, Tom proceeded to call himself as many nasty names as he knew (which made him quite uncomfortable, as a frightful lot of them involved his mother). Rubeus, still sobbing, was

escorted out of the hall and back into the back room, and Tom buried his face in his hands. He heard children around him whispering in shock.

"And lastly," Dippet shouted, "the boy responsible for the capture of the criminal is to receive a Special Award for Services to the School. T. M. Riddle, would you please allow yourself acknowledged?"

Tom felt as though someone had glued his feet to the floor. He could not have stood up if he'd tried. Instead of standing up, Tom slid down in his seat until he was completely concealed under the table. There was a collective giggle from the mass of students. After a few moments, Tom saw Professor Dippet's face through the thicket of legs under the table. He had a pained look on his face, as though getting on his knees was extraordinarily agonizing. "Tom? Tom, come on now, don't be silly," he said, his voice warm but his smile slightly forced. "Come on up to the front, then." Tom shook his head childishly, sliding down still further until he was sitting in the middle of the floor.

Dippet stood up again--it looked like hard work. "Mr. Riddle's feeling rather shy," he said sharply. "But let the records stand that in this year of 1948, T. M. Riddle received a Special Award for Services to the School, and five hundred points have been awarded to Slytherin House." The other Houses gasped with outrage, but the Slytherins clapped and cheered. Someone reached down under the table to shake Tom's hand, but Tom did not budge.

An elaborate feast went on above his head, but Tom did not join in. Partly because of the nausea caused by his head injuries and partly because of guilt, Tom was in no condition to eat. He spent the next half hour examining various types of shoes, until finally he grew bored with this and turned instead to the woodgrain of the table's underbelly. He heard people mention his name, usually with a giggling lilt to their voices, and a few girls looked under the table at him and started laughing hysterically.

Once the feast had finished, Tom finally convinced himself to stand up. He tried to leave the Great Hall quickly and quietly, but people were constantly stopping him, trying to shake his hand. In the act of veering out of the way of a cluster of Ravenclaw girls that he knew were rather fond of him, Tom accidentally collided with Nathan Potter. Nathan gave him a sad, subdued smile.

"I just wanted to let you know," Nathan said, "I'm really grateful for what you did. No, no, don't get all modest about it--it really means a lot to me that the person who killed Myrtle is out of the picture."

Tom gave Nathan an uneasy look. He remembered the last time he had seen him, the way he had been possessed by that frightening mad urge to kill him. To his horror, that same part of his psyche was becoming acutely aware of the steak knives on the nearby Gryffindor table. "It's okay," Tom said hurriedly. "Listen, Nathan, I really have to go--see you around."

"Of course--sorry for holding you up," Nathan sighed languidly. "G'bye, Tom."

Tom nodded in response and tried to follow the stream of students out of the hall. Unfortunately, in the entrance hall he was suddenly mobbed by the Ravenclaw girls and had to make a run for it.

Exams came and went, and the last three weeks of term were meant for the students to enjoy the sun. Tom, however, had his mind on other things. Dippet had agreed for the third year in a row to allow Tom to remain at Hogwarts over holiday, so that was not bothering him.

Tom had saved Hogwarts, to be sure, but at a price he was not sure he was willing to pay. A little consolation came from the fact that he had saved Rubeus from Azkaban as well, but he reminded himself fiercely that if it were not for him then Rubeus would never have been at risk in the first place. Rubeus moved into a log cabin out on the grounds, and Tom tried to visit him dozens of times. Rubeus eventually started speaking to him again, but his voice was begrudging and lethal. It became painfully apparent that their friendship had been completely destroyed, and nothing would be able to resurrect it. Tom felt a strong sense of loss and guilt, having ruined the only friendship he had had.

This, coupled with the even more tormenting remorse over Myrtle's death, sent Tom into a state of wild depression. Instead of staying out in the sun with the others, Tom spent day after day pacing the dormitory, until he almost *had* started to wear a hole in the floor. His own voice rebuked him, not to mention those incessant chatterers inside his own head. Nepenthe would watch him pace, often asking what was the matter, but Tom couldn't tell him. Nepenthe had no idea the sort of things that went on in Tom's life anymore--to Nepenthe's knowledge, Tom had never committed murder, let alone opened the Chamber of Secrets. Tom would always make up some ridiculous lie, stating that he was trying to crack a rune code, or an Arithmancy equation was getting to him.

As the students vanished for summer holiday, Tom grew even more withdrawn. Some days he would not even get out of bed, knowing that he had very little to do if he got up anyway. He could not read or eat, and his sleep was plagued with nightmares--all he could do was think. Lili often teased that he thought too much, but now it was actually true.

One morning in mid-July, Tom had overslept as usual, and had not bothered to rise. He was staring up at the bed's canopy, thinking as usual, when a small ball of feathers suddenly burst through the hangings. The fluffball proved itself to be an owl, carrying a note in its talons and looking thoroughly hyper. Tom sat up slightly, and the small owl dropped the note into his lap. Tom unfolded the message and read it over.

Mr. Riddle--

**Please get dressed and come to my office
immediately after you receive this message.**

--Professor Dumbledore

Tom sighed heavily and threw open the hangings. What had he done now? Showering and throwing on something random, Tom left the room, his light footfalls gracelessly dispirited.

After wandering the meandering passageways for a few minutes, Tom finally found himself in front of the door to Professor Dumbledore's office. The office was located directly behind the classroom, and there was a brass knocker in the shape of a phoenix. Tom rapped the knocker lightly, and within an instant Dumbledore's face had appeared in the doorway. "Ah, there you are, Tom," he said. "Come in."

Tom stepped inside and took a seat in front of the desk. He noticed a large stone basin sitting in the middle of it, but Dumbledore pushed it aside as though it meant nothing. Dumbledore seated himself, looking much older than his thirty-odd years. "This is the sixth day in a row you've not turned up for breakfast," he commented in a would-be casual voice. "You've become quite the recluse, Tom."

Tom shrugged, biting his lip.

Dumbledore leveled a gaze at him. "When's the last time you had something to eat or drink?" he asked.

"I had a bit of water last night," Tom replied, staring at his hands.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "I'm not even going to ask when you last ate," he remarked. His voice went dead serious. "Tom, I told you to come to me if anything was bothering you."

"Nothing's bothering me," Tom said flatly. "I'm just feeling exceptionally sleepy these days, is all."

Dumbledore looked unconvinced. Slowly, he tugged the stone basin to the middle of the desk. Tom looked into it. The rim was lined with ancient runes that Tom would be able to understand if he were not so drowsy, and it was filled with some swirling white substance that looked like a combination of mist and water. Two handles, in the shapes of pansies, lay on either side. "Let me show you something, Tom," Dumbledore said. "This is a Pensieve. Do you know what that is? No? Well, I must say, that's a first. Here, let me show you how it works."

Dumbledore drew out his wand and placed its tip to his own temple. The tip of the wand started to glow brilliant silver, and Dumbledore touched the wand to the surface of the Pensieve's substance. Immediately, the substance turned icy clear, and Tom could see an image in the bottom of the basin. It appeared to be a newspaper headline from the Daily Prophet. "DARK ARTS ON THE RISE; HOGWARTS STUDENT MURDERED AT HOGSMEADE", it read. The date showed that it had been December, 1946. Tom cringed.

"The Pensieve shows what's on your mind," Dumbledore explained, waving his wand. The Pensieve returned to normal. "You put your thoughts inside and it spits them back out--great way to organize your thoughts."

"So you're thinking about--?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied heavily. "The Dark Arts in general, really, but the Po family were very close friends of mine. Now, let's see what's on your mind, eh?"

Tom blanched. "That's okay, Professor," he said nervously, "but I really don't--"

Before he could finish his sentence, Dumbledore had tapped him in the middle of the forehead with his wand. Tom watched mutely as Dumbledore drew the wand away. A twinkling silver thought clung to the wand tip. Tom sat helplessly as Dumbledore placed the thought in the Pensieve, and a figure appeared inside it. To Tom's horror, it was Rubeus.

"I din' do nothin'!" the boy in the Pensieve insisted. "Yeh know Aragog 'd not harm no one, not if I tell 'im not ter..." The image faded, replaced by Myrtle Potter.

"You're never nice to me anymore!" she whined. "Why did you do it? *Why?*"

Dumbledore looked up mildly. "Why did you do what?" he asked, an almost triumphant note to his voice.

Tom thought fast. "A few days before she--before she died, I got a bit grumpy with her," he said, truthfully enough. "She was whining about some girl, Olive Hornby, and I told her to act her age and stop sniveling. I hadn't got much sleep, see, so my fuse was short--well, shorter than usual. I felt really horrid about it afterward."

"Maybe you feel guilty, then, about her death?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"Maybe--I don't know..."

"Best find out, then." Eager for more evidence, Dumbledore seized another thought, this one from the left temple.

To Tom's surprise, the thought was not silver, but immaculate white. Dumbledore set the thought upon the surface of the substance, and Tom watched in amazement as a twelve-year-old version of himself appeared in the Pensieve. It was curled up in a ball, much in the same way Tom used to curl up when he was scared, and it seemed to be crying. Dumbledore looked in at it, and the little figure suddenly went ballistic.

"Help me! Help me!" it started shouting, its voice echoing slightly. "Mother of God, if you've any decency, help me! Help me!"

Tom felt a sudden, dizzying pain in the left side of his head.

"Please, I'm not joking! This isn't fake! Don't put me back in that awful room with him!" the little figure was pleading. "Dumbledore, help me!"

Dumbledore shot Tom a very serious and perplexed look. "Can you explain this to me, Tom?" he asked slowly.

"Uh... erm... that's not what I was thinking about," Tom said blearily, rubbing at the aching area around his left eye.

"But it's on your mind?"

"I..." Tom looked into the Pensieve again, at the little figure that was now down on its knees. "I've never had a thought even *remotely* like this," Tom mused, and he bit back a cry of pain as the sting in his head doubled. Dumbledore noticed the odd look on his face, and waved his wand--the picture in the Pensieve vanished in perfect synchronization with the abrupt disappearance of the pain.

"Odd," Dumbledore said, and he took another thought--this time from the right-hand side of Tom's head.

The contrast was freakish.

Tom first noticed a strange, elated feeling rushing through his veins. Not really thinking straight, Tom thought it felt like freedom--wild, uninhibited, euphoric, and--strangely--relieved. It was the first time he had felt happy in nearly a year, and he had no idea what the cause was. Tom felt like singing, or going out to the broomshed and going for a fly around the school. He couldn't help smiling, though he felt silly doing it without reason.

Dumbledore looked up from the Pensieve gravely--he looked rather ill, and paled even more as he saw the smile on Tom's face. "Why so cheery all of a sudden, Tom?" he asked in a rather pained voice.

"I don't know," Tom grinned.

Dumbledore nodded. "Come over here and look in the Pensieve again, Tom."

Tom peered in, and he felt as though his stomach had disintegrated. He backed away, very slowly, until he was straight-backed against the stone wall. "Holy righteous Christ," he muttered.

It was his Specter. And it was laughing its head off.

"Don't let him back in, now, Tom!" one of his voices begged him. "You're free of him, just don't let him back in... tell Professor Dumbledore thank you, now. Tell him from me, okay?" The other voice remained silent. Dumbledore gazed into the Pensieve for a few moments, lost in thought, before it happened.

Tom felt his head jerk suddenly to the left, and there was an unbearable burning sensation all throughout his body. The world went black, and while he was still aware that he was sitting in Professor Dumbledore's office, Tom could not see or hear any of his surroundings. "What the hell--?" he tried to yell, but his lips would not move. His body seemed to be frozen in position, paralyzed--he could barely breathe.

"Oh no!" cried the voice that had just been talking to him. "Tom, quick... fight against him..."

"Who?" he thought desperately.

"Voldemort... Voldemort..."

Tom was about to attempt to say something, say that he was Voldemort, but he stopped. There was the Specter, standing before him, and a crumpled heap of person was lying at its feet. The latter turned to look at Tom, and proved itself to be that same carbon copy he had seen in the Pensieve. "Help me fight him--keep him away!" it yelped. The Specter, laughing, kicked it hard in the stomach.

"How can I help?!"

"I don't know," the little Tom cried. "Just try... while you're in your right mind... just try..."

The Specter shoved the little Tom away easily and advanced on the real one. "Hello, old friend," it smiled, lips curling into a cruel smirk. "Time to come off your cloud... pipe dream's over..."

It sat down on his right-hand side and dug its claws into his immobile shoulder--injecting itself into his bloodstream, his mind. The Specter dissolved again. Sobbing, the little Tom ran forward and hugged him about the left knee--it dissolved as well.

"Tom! TOM! Tom, show some sign of life here!"

Tom blinked a few times. "Huh?" he said inadequately. He rubbed his eyes, yawning, as though he had just been asleep.

Dumbledore sighed with relief. "You looked like you were having an epileptic fit," he sighed. "You were just staring blankly, not moving a muscle--what happened to you?"

Tom was about to reply, but he felt a lurch of panic as cold, sharp hands took control of his vocal cords. "Oh, I was daydreaming--sorry about that," he heard himself say. "Listen, you know that Pensieve thing?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think it'd be possible to do something like that to another object? To put your thoughts and feelings into something and have them stay in there forever?"

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know, giving a teapot your personality or something." Tom was in a frenzy, trying to regain control of his own body, but the newly returned Specter had a firm foothold and was not about to give it up. "Is that possible?"

Dumbledore frowned sternly and stood up. "Possible? Certainly. Safe? Doubtfully. Legal? Absolutely not."

The Specter shrugged Tom's shoulders for him. "Just curious. Anyway, is that all you wanted?"

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Yes... you may go, Tom."

Tom's legs carried him out of the room and down the hallway. It was not until he reached the middle of the staircase that he suddenly regained control over his own actions. He stumbled and fell backwards a few stairs, but there was a charm on the staircase that prevented him from tumbling far enough to hurt himself. "*WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT, YOU BASTARD?*" he yelled, his words directed toward the half of his brain that had suddenly let up. His words echoed around the deserted stairwell. There was no answer, either outside or inside his head. Tom shivered convulsively. The Specter's takeover had seemingly no motive, but it was still enough to make him ill at ease.

At any rate, he thought, he had better start acting more normally around the professors. To appease Dumbledore's curiosity, Tom must start to go to breakfast every morning and spend most of his time out on the grounds. It would be torturous, and Tom would constantly feel jittery, but it was better than having Dumbledore breathing down his neck.

As he mounted the stairs to the Slytherin common room, Tom fell to wondering. Why on earth did the Specter want to know about Pensieves?

Tom passed the rest of the summer feeling distinctly jumpy, and he felt as though Dumbledore was watching him at every corner. Tom took to taking long walks around the lake, eyes riveted to the ground, drowning in thoughts. Gradually, self-hatred began to fade--Tom could not stand hating himself for too long, not because he was arrogant but because it was too depressing. Instead, Tom turned his anger toward the world. After all, if it weren't for the Muggles, he would never have tried so desperately to avoid the orphanage--furthermore, he would not have had to open the Chamber in the first place. But there were other components as well.

Had Dumbledore never asked him to the office, Tom might have been spared a violent Specter attack. Had Dippet not offered that award, Tom might not feel guilty for gaining at Rubeus's disadvantage. Had Myrtle not been in that stall, the whole fiasco with Rubeus and Aragog might never have happened. Had Mandy Birch not been such a ghastly flirtatious brat, Tom would have been spared immeasurable embarrassment. Had his friends been more supportive of him after Lili's death, he might not be so lonely. The list went on for quite some time.

Only half-consciously, Tom began to avidly abhor almost all the world--not just Muggles or Mudbloods or annoying girls, but near everyone. The only advantage he could see with the people he hated was that he might be able to gain some pleasure (as well as some power) in their demises. Faces of people he hated danced around in his head, and he imagined killing each one over and over--picturing situations in which they had irked them and pretending a violent reaction. It almost became reflex--had one of them actually turned up and started picking on him, Tom might very well have drawn out his wand and muttered an Unforgivable Curse.

Autumn brought studies and the bustle of school life--Tom went about his business as usual, but he found himself in a near-constant state of fury. Every time he saw someone he disliked, his stomach would drop and his hand would inch over to his wand. The teachers noticed the change in him and started treating him gingerly, which was nothing to the way most of the other students treated him.

As September melted into October, the talk around school turned once again to that bothersome Halloween Dance. One day in the dawning weeks of October, Tom woke up with the buzz of social fanaticism already in his ears. His fellow Slytherin boys were discussing (in purposefully gruff voices) which girls they were interested in taking to the dance. Tom rolled over with the intention of covering his ears with his pillow, when he remembered that he had class. Groaning, Tom threw the hangings open and tugged on his school robes. His hair was still rather wet from the previous night's shower, which landed his shirt collar in a damp state that would likely irritate him all day.

Tying his shoes, Tom listened to the other boys' voices--Francis sighing over that obnoxious hussy, Electra Andes, while Richard Zabini pretended to be fascinated by the discussion; Adrian and Zuhayr arguing loudly over which one of them got to ask Larkin Mallory. He frowned at Adrian and Zuhayr. When had his (now distant) friends turned into such *socialites*? Tom noticed a recurring pattern--Richard Zabini would get all quiet around the Halloween, Holiday, and Valentine's Day dances, and he would always "get sick" and find some way of getting out of going. (Tom had no idea why, either, and it had happened every year since second.) This year, Tom was seriously considering following his lead, even if he had to sit around the hospital wing and have Madam Viola shovel potion down his throat.

Throwing on a pointed hat and slinging his bookbag over his shoulder, Tom brushed between Zuhayr and Adrian on his way down the stairs. He sidled quietly into the Great Hall and sat silently at the Slytherin table, pulling the visor of his hat low over his eyes in hopes no one would recognize him. Naturally, the minute he did so a cluster of third- and fourth-year Ravenclaw girls hustled over and sat across from him. "Hi," a blue-eyed, red-haired one said, smiling demurely.

"Good morning, Miss Parkman," Tom said, tactfully masking the venom in his voice.

"So," said Sylvia Qu, a very pretty Ravenclaw fourth-year. "Have you decided to ask any girls to the dance yet?"

Tom coughed meaningfully. "No," he replied slowly.

"You really ought to--the pickings are good this year," a tagalong second-year giggled.

"I wouldn't know, Miss Brown, as I've never looked around," Tom said evasively. He wondered if Ravenclaw House's level-headed, famously clever founder had been as much of a flirt as some of her charges.

"Well, look around! Actually, just look right over here!" Sylvia Qu grinned, striking a decidedly risqué pose. The whole lot of them burst out laughing.

"I pity you, Rowena," Tom sighed. The girls looked at him strangely, and Tom went back to his meal, completely ignoring their laughter. After a while, they returned to their table, tittering insanely.

"Wonder why they put me off so much," Tom thought grimly. He had never been one for girls--something in him always thought of himself as taken. By whom, he had no idea. Not Lili, of course, and not Hannah. But there was only one other woman he had ever ventured to love, and that was his mother. But of *course* it wasn't his mother--only sick psychological freaks loved their mothers romantically.

And he *wasn't* a sick psychological freak. Well, except for the little voices. But they didn't count.

Before he could further panic over whether or not he was a textbook example of an Oedipus Complex, Tom was jerked from his reverie by a tap on the shoulder. He turned around to see Mandy Birch. "Oh great," he thought, "here we go..."

"Heya, Tom," she said sweetly, batting her eyelids and showing off her luxuriant eyelashes. "Whatcha doing?"

"Eating breakfast. *Fous le camp.*"

Mandy didn't speak French.

"I didn't know you spoke French," Mandy said with a grin, scooting uncomfortably close to him. "I hear you don't have a date for the dance."

"*Marie mère de Christ,*" Tom muttered. "*Tu es très egoiste si tu pense que je t'aime --tu es dégoutante, Mademoiselle, et je suis très triste parce-que tu ne parle pas en français. Fous ta-même, chiennes.*"

"That language... ohh, it sounds so *sexy!*" Mandy cooed. Daphne Gatefield, who was half-French and happened to be sitting a few seats away from Tom, guffawed loudly at this statement. Tom shot her a discreet smirk.

"I'm awful at it," Tom said in the most false voice he could muster. "*Mon français est très dégoutant, mais moins dégoutante que tu. Alors, quelle est le mot dans la phrase 'fous ta-même' que tu ne comprends pas, pute?*"

"Did you just ask me out?" Mandy chattered obliviously.

"No."

Mandy's face fell slightly. "Oh--well, if you ever change your mind and decide you want to go to the dance with me, you know where my dorm room is."

"*Elle t'invite à sa chambre à coucher? Oui, elle est une pute,*" Daphne commented. She and Tom both burst out laughing, and Mandy laughed along, still painfully unaware of what they were saying.

"*Au revoir, j'envie de manger mon petit déjeuner,*" Tom said to Mandy.

Getting the vague gist, Mandy nodded and strode away.

"Your French isn't bad," Daphne commented. "It needs some work, of course--I've never known an Englishman to truly master the language--but it gets the point across." She grinned. "That little tart..."

"Eurgh, I *know...*" Tom got back to his own meal and Daphne returned to hers. Tom was hit by an odd feeling of nostalgia--he remembered how, ages ago, he had laughed and joked with his friends. He hadn't had a good laugh in over a year, and it was an odd feeling.

Finishing his meal, Tom headed to his first class, Study of Ancient Runes. Professor Waltham was early, as usual, and was sitting busily at her desk while the early-bird students hustled in. Tom got out his book and started reading, trying to ignore the giggling chatter around him. When the last student, Molly Robbins, had entered the classroom, and the bell had rung, Professor Waltham cleared her throat. "*Portus Fermus,*" she said with a wave of her wand. The two stone doors slammed shut, and Tom closed his book, seizing his homework.

"If you'll all pass forward last night's essay on the properties of ancient Welsh adjectives," said Professor Waltham. There was a collective grumble and a rustling of papers as the students

shuffled through their jam-packed bookbags. Tom coolly handed his own paper to the Gryffindor girl sitting in front of him. Professor Waltham gathered up all the papers with one wave of her wand, and they landed in a tidy pile in the middle of her desk. "Today," she said casually, "we will finally be able to begin what we have been preparing for, for the past three years. You finally know enough to begin to invent your own simple conjuring spells."

Tom's interest perked. He rather enjoyed making up spells using ancient verbs and syllables--using his rune dictionary, he had picked out random words without looking at the definitions and had made up the most ridiculous spells he had ever seen. One, for instance, conjured inside-out snakes--this one had immensely disturbed Nepenthe.

After a very long and complicated lecture, Professor Waltham had all of them drag out their dictionaries and get to work on their (supposedly) first-ever invented spells. Tom threw his dictionary open and stared down at the page, suddenly completely lost for ideas. The page he was staring at was in the English-to-runes side of the dictionary, and at the top it was labeled "PARADIGM - PASTORAL". Somehow, Tom's eyes wandered over to the word "Parselmouth".

Tom idly glanced at the old Celtic symbol for "Parselmouth". He could tell by looking at it that it was pronounced "mor". Deciding this might be interesting, Tom wrote "MOR" in the center of his parchment and flipped over to the runes-to-English side of the dictionary. After going through the pages a while, Tom found an ancient Egyptian symbol, "dre". The definition read "green; verdant; Slytherin House."

"Parselmouth green... Parselmouth Slytherin, maybe?..." Tom muttered. Shrugging, he wrote "DRE" after "MOR" so that it looked like "MORDRE." Tom almost laughed at how much his invented word looked like "Murder". Still not satisfied, he turned to the "M" section and found the Latin rune "Mors"--"Death; a skull". MORMORDRE. Tom reasoned his spell would probably make a green skull, but how on earth did you make "Parselmouth" out of a conjuring spell? His curiosity getting the better of him, Tom plucked his wand out of his bookbag. "*Mors-Mormordre*," Tom murmured.

He immediately wished he hadn't--the effect was rather startling, and on such a large scale that it attracted much attention. An enormous green skull, at least six feet in diameter, burst forth from the wand's tip and rose slowly to hover near the ceiling. A poison-green serpent protruded from the mouth like some grotesque tongue. The students and professor all gaped up at it, and Tom just blinked.

"Well done, Mr. Riddle," Professor Waltham said, recovering from the shock. "Very good job--which spell did you use?"

"*Mormordre*," Tom said again, forgetting he was still holding his wand. A second six-foot skull floated up to the ceiling to join the first.

"Ah--see how Mr. Riddle has mixed the languages? You don't have to stick to Latin, Greek, or Celtic, remember--mixing and matching often makes for a better spell." Professor Waltham turned and smiled at him. "Twenty-five points to Slytherin," she added.

"For *what?*" hissed Philip Cedric. "The thing's obviously Slytherin-made Dark magic!"

"You really think so, Phil?" asked Molly Robbins fearfully.

"You bet your pigtails!" Philip said earnestly. Tom gave him a withering look. "It's some kind of--some kind of *Dark mark* or something!"

"Thanks for the idea, Philip," Tom called, just to taunt. "That's what I'll call it. The Dark Mark." Though, Tom mused, it wasn't really all that bad an idea. The Dark Mark--it had a ring to it. Morsmordre. The Dark Mark. "It could be my own personal symbol--like a signature, perhaps," Tom thought. "And I could teach its spell to all my followe--"

Followers? Where did *that* come from?

Clearing his throat, Tom got back to his dictionary, but he felt jittery all the rest of the day.

In the weeks leading up to Halloween, Tom started to wonder why on earth girls seemed to find him so attractive. He knew it must be something superficial, for he was correct in his impression that he was not a very nice person. Tom would have worn a burlap bag over his head if only to stop the girls from constantly flirting with him, and, by the day before the dance, Tom was idly starting to wonder if burning huge scars across his face was the way to go.

As it had been for so many years, Mandy Birch was his most persistent pursuer. It seemed like every time he turned a corner, Mandy was there--sporting a new hairstyle in hopes he would make a comment; wearing robes from her first year, thinking they were tight enough to make him notice her figure; asking him to say something in French for her. She was like a very clingy puppy, a tagalong he could never shake--sometimes he found it hard not to reach out and slap her.

Halloween morning came, a Saturday, and Tom woke up around noon amid excited chattering. Tom rolled his eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but Francis Malfoy threw his drapes open. "Hey, Mudblood!" he smirked. "Still don't have a date for the dance?"

"I find it disturbing that you, being allegedly male, are so giggly about a social event," Tom snapped. "I don't, for your information, and I frankly don't want one. Now bugger off."

"Language, Riddle."

Tom proceeded to say something several times more vulgar, which made Francis laugh hysterically.

"You're pathetic, Mudblood. I'm sorry for you, actually, that that orphanage of yours has caretakers who would teach you words like *that*. Why don't you have a date, anyway? Are you a homosexual or something?" Tom slowly raised an eyebrow, and Francis shot him a taunting grin. "Are you one, Riddle? Do you have a *boyfriend*?"

Tom put on a very earnest face. "Malfoy, I'm flattered, but... I just don't *like* you that way. Thanks for the offer, though--I really hope I haven't hurt your feelings." He heard Adrian and Zuhayr burst out laughing. Tom took a long look at Francis's reddening face, shot him an evil smirk, and whipped his drapes closed.

"I think I'll fake an illness today," Tom thought, staring up at the canopy. "God, *anything* to get out of that stupid dance..." Tom spent a few minutes practicing a fake cough--it sounded convincing in his head. If only he could remember that spell to make people cough; but then again, he wasn't sure he wanted to curse himself. He waited until all the other boys had gone down to breakfast, then dragged himself out of bed and meandered toward the infirmary.

He found Madam Viola in the hospital wing, talking with a cinnamon-haired Slytherin first-year.

"Poppy, for heaven's sakes, why would you want to be my helper?" she was saying. "It's a very hard job--"

"I'm going to be a mediwitch someday," Poppy said in what she clearly thought was a shrewd, clever voice, "and Hogwarts doesn't offer any medical courses until seventh year. I wanted to get a head start."

"I'll have to think about it," Madam Viola sighed. "Back to your common room, now, Miss Pomfrey."

Poppy smiled sweetly, and was just on her way out when Madam Viola finally noticed Tom hovering in the doorway. He coughed a couple times before beginning. "Madam Viola?" he half-wheezed, trying his best to look feverish. "I feel really horrible today... I don't think I can go to the Halloween feast."

Poppy's hazel eyes lit up. "Sit down on one of the beds," she instructed. "I don't like the sound of that cough--you might have pneumonia! Or--or whooping cough, or--ooh, tuberculosis!"

The little first-year was jumping around excitedly, and Tom coughed dramatically to mask his laughter. Madam Viola shot Poppy a reproving look. "Your common room, Missy... Sit down on a bed, Tom, I'll take your temperature." She drew a thermometer from her pocket and placed it under Tom's tongue, reminding him, as usual, not to bite.

"He looks pale," Poppy commented after a few minutes. "And kind of clammy, too." She put on a very authoritative voice. "Do you feel nauseous when you cough? Have you been coughing up blood?" she asked importantly.

Tom nodded, then acted as though it made his head hurt. Poppy was ecstatic.

"It's tuberculosis for sure, Madam Viola!" she shouted. "We're going to have to pull him from the jaws of death, aren't we?"

"Poppy Elizabeth Pomfrey, for the last bloody time, I told you--GET BACK TO YOUR COMMON ROOM!" Madam Viola yelled, losing her temper.

"Yahoo! I get to help save his life!" Poppy went on oblivious.

Frowning darkly, Madam Viola strode over and pulled the thermometer out of Tom's mouth. She looked at it, and her frown increased. "Your temperature's just fine--a little *below* normal, as a matter of fact."

"Ohh, he might have hypothermia!" Poppy squealed.

"I'm normal?" Tom fake-wheezed. "But I feel so awful..."

"I think what you have," said Madam Viola, "is a first-class case of nerves. It's normal to be afraid of going to dances, Tom, but honestly, it'll do you some good to get out a bit."

"But I'm *sick!*" Tom insisted.

"No, you're not. Maybe getting dressed and heading out on the grounds to be with the other children would make you feel better. Good day, Tom." Shooing him out of the infirmary, the old woman turned around and began scolding Poppy, who still wouldn't leave.

Tom frowned and trudged back to Slytherin Tower. Sure, it always worked for Richard Zabini--who was possibly the worst liar in Slytherin House--but of course it wouldn't work for *Tom*. Just his bloody luck.

Once he had reached the dormitory, he threw on a set of robes and ran down to the common room. Tom plunked into a chair and gazed into the fire. A few minutes later, Poppy Pomfrey entered the common room, looking very cheerful and carrying an enormous medical book. "Displaced hypochondria," Tom thought with a roll of the eyes, as Poppy rushed over and showed him a diagram of the lungs.

Poppy made very unusual company, though she was rather entertaining. Tom played along, and told her a rather disturbing story about the time a girl at the orphanage had died of bacterial meningitis (Poppy listened rapturously, hanging onto every word). Poppy ran down to the feast at seven, and Tom, hungry from not eating all day, followed after.

Deciding he didn't want to listen to Poppy babble about trichinosis all evening, Tom sat at the other end of the table, away from everyone else. He barely tasted what he was eating--so awfully was he dreading the dance. He knew from experience that dances were usually spent hiding behind a curtain to keep girls from coming anywhere near him. Tom had once asked Dippet why the dance was required, only to be told that it was meant to allow the shyest students to socialize themselves a bit.

Once the feast had finished, Tom returned to the dormitory with all the other boys and changed into his dress robes. Having grown out of three sets of robes (one black-and-silver, one plain hooded black with billowing sleeves, and a strange grey one that made him look like a druid), Tom had finally given in and bought some that were deep green, the same color as his cloak. The effect was interesting--he still looked gloomy and cynical, but while wearing green he looked more like a very young Salazar Slytherin than anything else.

The Great Hall looked lovely, as usual, but Tom gave it half a glance as though it were nothing. Some people were wearing Halloween costumes and some were merely dressed up--they were given the option of wearing dress robes or a costume. Tom picked Poppy Pomfrey out of the crowd--she was dressed up in a mediwizard's robes. No surprises there. Serena Birch, Mandy's older sister, was dressed as Columbine, standing and chatting with a brown-haired Ravenclaw boy in Harlequin clothes. One Muggle-born fourth-year was actually a toaster. Tom had to admit, the Halloween dance was at least more interesting than the other two--it was amusing to watch people trying to dance in ridiculous costumes.

Ambika Dawes, the half-veela Gryffindor girl who was currently dressed as a gypsy, shot Tom a grin. "Let's see--you were Hamlet in second and third year, Hades in fourth, and a druid necromancer in fifth--now you're a psychopathic Hogwarts founder? Honestly, Riddle, lighten up a bit!"

"Meh," Tom said indifferently. "I didn't intend to resemble anyone--not this year, not ever. But believe whatever you want, I frankly don't care."

Ambika waited a few moments. "So do you want to dance or what?"

"I'll go for the 'what' if it's all the same to you."

Ambika shrugged. "Your loss, Riddle." She stalked off, a trail of giddy boys following behind her.

Tom was about to go back to people-watching, when he suddenly noticed the group of Ravenclaw girls who had taken to following him about. They were headed up by Eirynn Parkman

and Sylvia Qu, both of whom were looking wildly around--presumably for him. Silently as a shadow, Tom brushed past all the other students and exited the Great Hall. He strode through the darkened entrance hall, his footsteps echoing slightly. The door creaked as he shoved it open, so he sidled out as quickly as possible and shut it behind him.

It was so foggy outside that it was almost eerie, and Tom could see the vague sickle of the moon through the miasma. Tom made his way over to the lake and leaned against a nearby tree, gazing into the half-visible waters and thinking.

"I really have to get some idea what I want to do with my life," Tom thought heavily, kicking a stone into the lake. (The giant squid made an indignant noise.) "I mean, I'm almost *seventeen*--and I have no bloody idea what I'm going to be when I graduate."

The word "followers" hovered to his consciousness again, but he ignored it.

Furthermore, there was the issue of the Chamber of Secrets. Tom still wanted to punish Muggles, of course, but how could he? He knew he was not emotionally equipped to deal with actually bumping off students. He sighed. He could always take a disciple, teach them how to get into the Chamber--but no, he was the only person in the world who spoke Parseltongue.

The best idea, he figured, would be to store all the information in some kind of book or map--including a spirit that could speak Parseltongue. The idea expanded within minutes--just like the Pensieve, Tom could hide carbon-copies of all his darkest thoughts and feelings in the pages of some book. He would not put all of himself in it; that would be too dangerous. Instead, he would put in a shadow of the half of his personality that seemed most to enjoy the Chamber of Secrets. He would put a rather shrewder, crueler version of Tom Marvolo Riddle inside a book--a diary, perhaps, so that his new protégé could talk to him, be possessed by his ideas. It was an unnerving thought, that his darkest dreams would be lived out through the heart and soul of some poor sod--but it was better than opening the Chamber himself.

It looked like he had finally found a use for that seven-year-old diary lying in his trunk.

At that moment, there was a sudden rustling in the nearby trees. Tom whirled around and found himself facing Mandy Birch. She was wearing something that made her (in Tom's humble opinion) look like a working woman, to put it gently--Tom mused that she must be freezing, but was in no mood to offer his cloak.

"Hi, Tom," Mandy grinned.

"Bloody *hell*..." Tom muttered. "What are you doing out here?"

"What are *you* doing out here?" Mandy giggled.

"I'm standing in the flipping fog; what's it to you?" Tom snarled. He drew his cloak tighter around him and leveled a gaze at Mandy that would have made grown men shudder.

"You must be awfully cold out here, standing all alone..."

"I'm warm enough."

Mandy ignored this. "Sure you couldn't do with some company?" Tom flinched. Was it just him, or was she being more of a close talker than usual?

"Positive," Tom snapped.

"I don't know about that... I don't like to see a gorgeous bloke like you feeling lonely, especially not at Halloween..." There was no doubt about it, Mandy was standing much too close to him for comfort.

Tom winced. "Did I mention I have mononucleosis?" he lied, inching slowly backward.

"Do I look like I care?" Mandy breathed. She lunged at him, clearly aiming to snog.

Tom acted swiftly. Mere inches before contact might have been made, Tom put out his hands defensively--they landed firmly on Mandy's shoulders, right near her neck. Mandy looked disappointed, and gave a coquettish pout. "Why'd you stop me?" she asked.

Tom had a sudden, morbid idea. His hands were in the right place, he could put an end to this little annoyance once and for all...

"I have my reasons," he said softly, hands slowly inching toward her throat.

Mandy mistook the action for a caress. "Oh--you like it long and drawn out, do you?" she laughed, a rather triumphant look on her face. "Fine--take your time about it, Tom, I'm in no hurry."

"Neither am I," Tom murmured. The pressure he was placing on her throat gradually increased--he remembered how good he had been at strangling those baby chicks, and was amused at the analogy.

Mandy started to reply, but suddenly noticed there was something wrong. "Tom? Tom, what on earth are you--?"

Tom smiled innocently. "You always *were* a slutty little bitch, weren't you?" He allowed himself a laugh at the shocked look on her face, and tightened his grip considerably. "Couldn't take no for an answer, eh?" Mandy, by now unable to speak, tried to struggle out of his grasp, but he merely grinned. "Now, now, struggling will make it worse... You're getting attention from me, Mandy. Aren't you enjoying it? *Aren't you?*!"

Somehow, Tom got the impression he was gaining far too much pleasure from this. He was ecstatic in the girl's fear and pain, could not get enough of it--it was a dark, furious kind of pleasure that sent his senses reeling. This damned sin.

Common sense returned with a jolt as his eyes returned to her face.

Blue.

He let go.

25. Inner Fire, Outward Flame

There was a very frightening moment as Mandy fell backwards, and Tom felt panic's claws clench around his stomach. She landed in the grass with a thud, and Tom felt the feeling return to his legs as he watched her unconsciously gasp for air. He rushed to the girl's side, fumbling in his cloak pocket for his wand. Somehow, he knew exactly what he was going to do. "*Ennervate*," he murmured, pointing the wand at her.

Mandy sat up sharply, still gasping. She whirled on him, eyes wide. Seeing him, she flew into a rage. "WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU DO-mmmmf!" she exclaimed, halting as Tom clamped a hand over her mouth. She struggled and showered him with little-girl slaps, which Tom ignored impatiently.

"*Obliviate*." Gold and silver sparks shot from the wand in his hand, and Mandy assumed a rather perplexed look. She shook her head a few times, and by the time she had blinked all the clouds from her eyes, Tom had vanished into the smoky fog.

The close call with Mandy Birch kept Tom feeling edgy for days. If his temper threatened to erupt, Tom would try desperately to keep in check--which was near impossible considering the fact that he was still in world-hating mode. However, all this pent-up anger might be a blessing in disguise. One quick trip to the Restricted Section had found him the perfect books on transporting thoughts and feelings. Tom spent hours reading up on Pensieves, the risks of soul transport, and Ministry laws regarding the matter--for, he thought, it was always smart to know exactly how much trouble one would be in if one were caught in the act. It turned out that pulling a stunt like what he was trying would probably land him in a dementor's mouth.

Meanwhile, Mandy kept on with her life as usual. She seemed to have filled in the blanks by herself, and was firm in her belief that she had made conquest of him at last. She acted rather differently around Tom--shooting him the occasional wink and giving him embarrassing nicknames he could never bring himself to repeat. The whole of Slytherin House seemed quite willing to embrace the idea, but Tom forced himself to remember that it was at least better than the things they'd be saying if they knew what actually *had* gone on.

To take his mind off things, Tom devoted almost all his free time to studying this magical diary theory. It seemed that if he was creative and used a few made-up spells, he might just be able to transplant all his dark thoughts and feelings into the diary. And after that, he wouldn't have to worry about the Chamber of Secrets ever again. That would certainly be wonderful--then he could forget about the whole ordeal and move on to trying desperately to decide between possible future careers.

In November, the company in London that made the O.W.L. exams finally finished grading the tests and sent them back to Hogwarts. Usually it didn't take so long, but because the former fifth-years who had been petrified had had to retake the test, grading was made sufficiently longer. All the sixth-years were pulled out of class to head to the Great Hall and get their tests back. Tom was rather disappointed at this--Professor Twiddly had been giving a fascinating lesson in History of Magic when Dippet's voice had summoned them. Bored stiff and stuck at the end of the alphabet, Tom sat at the Slytherin table with his fellows and waited for Professor Dumbledore to call his name. He expected this to be a boring but relatively quick ordeal.

"Aberson" . . . "Andes" . . . "Bates" . . .

Tom was strongly reminded of the Sorting back in his first year. As Murray Bates shuffled forward from the Ravenclaw table to receive his certificate, Tom drew a slip of paper out of his bookbag and started doodling. The names kept marching for around half an hour, and Tom watched as students made their way up to the front and received their scores. Some looked elated; others, mortified. Francis Malfoy almost looked ready to cry, but when Larkin Mallory got her score she cartwheeled her way back to the Slytherin table, grinning from ear to ear.

A rather pretty Gryffindor girl called Carina Marx came next, then Adrian Müller, Melissa Navero, Michael Orion, Beth Palmer... Tom only really started listening when he heard "Pearson, Griffith". In the old days, Griffith Pearson came before Lili Po alphabetically, but now there was no Lili between them, and Tom knew he would be next.

Griffith made his way back to the Hufflepuff table, a look of enormous relief radiating from his every gesture. Tom set his quill back in his bag, stuffed the parchment into his robe pocket, and got ready to stand up.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and looked down at the list--he hesitated a minute, then consulted a couple other teachers. Tom watched, frowning, as the other teachers shrugged and whispered at Dumbledore to keep going. "Robbins, Molly," he called uncertainly.

No one else noticed the discrepancy. Molly got up from the Gryffindor table, beaming, and flounced over to receive her certificate. Tom's face had gone slightly blank. Why had they completely skipped him? No, perhaps it was just a misprint--perhaps he would come next. Tom got ready to go up again.

"Sahabjira, Zuhayr," Dumbledore went on. This time, everyone at Slytherin noticed it--Zuhayr got up very tentatively, shooting Tom half a glance. The other Slytherins gave Tom surprised looks, and by the time Zuhayr reached the table again with his seventeen O.W.L. marks the whole hall seemed to have noticed there was something amiss.

"Tanner, Victoria," Dumbledore called, pointedly avoiding looking at the Slytherin table. The brown-haired Ravenclaw girl made right for the front, watching out of the corner of her eye as some of her fellows conversed urgently with members of the Slytherin table.

"Maybe he failed or something?" Tom heard Francis put in hopefully.

"What's going on?" asked Fiona Jedor from the end of the Ravenclaw table. A chorus of Slytherin voices answered.

"Tom Riddle--"

"They skipped Tom Riddle. They bloody *skipped* him--"

"He's top of the class, how could they *miss* him like that?"

Tom felt his face turn a strange pink colour.

"Never heard of anything like this happening before."

"Not unless he failed," Francis said again.

"Riddle never fails, Malfoy, you idiot..."

"Wayersky, Natashenka," Dumbledore said in a much louder voice, having to project himself more over the growing hum of whispering voices. The Russian Ravenclaw made her way to the front reluctantly, wanting to stay and listen to the other students muse over the matter.

"Do *you* know what's going on, Tom?" Serena Birch asked him. Tom shook his head, still quite embarrassed and now feeling rather anxious. Why was it that coincidence always seemed to single him out for these things?

"Maybe the O.W.L. people haven't finished counting all the marks he got."

"Or maybe the idiots just forgot him."

"You don't have to be an idiot to forget Riddle," Tom heard Philip Cedric say loudly. "Nothings are easy to forget--" He was cut off quickly as Tom snapped his fingers under the table--it was a strain, but he managed to hit Philip with a Helium Hex from across the room without using his wand.

Natashenka returned to the table very quickly, and Richard Zabini meandered up to the front of the hall. He received his score very quickly and returned to the table. By now, all four houses knew about it.

"Perhaps they're saving him for last because he got the highest score?" Lucy Chubb said admiringly.

But no--even this was incorrect. Dumbledore rolled up his parchment and Professor Xavier, looking harried, started shooing the students back out of the hall. Tom remained in the hall uncertainly, watching as the teachers whispered together and kept glancing over at him. A feeling of unease was gripping at his viscera, and Tom began to fiddle with the buckles on his leather bookbag. Maybe he really didn't want to stay after all...

Across the room, Dippet shrugged, and muttered something to Dumbledore. Tom tried to read his lips--it looked like he was saying "Albus, you're the one with all the experience. *You* do it." That, of course, didn't make Tom feel any more comfortable at all. Professors Twiddly and Camden both started away, calling back that they had classes to tend to--now he couldn't even have the support of either one of his favorite teachers. Dippet left the Great Hall too, looking exasperated, and all the other teachers made random and hurried excuses, shooting Tom amazed and frightened looks. Dumbledore was left alone by the staff table, looking slightly irked at his lack of support. Unsure what to do, Tom kept his seat at the Slytherin table and went on messing with the straps of his bookbag.

He felt the table shift slightly, and sensed Dumbledore sitting across from him. Tom idly--perhaps insolently--continued to stare at his hands and fidget.

"You're probably wondering why we didn't call your name," Dumbledore said finally.

Tom fidgeted some more. "Yes," he said after a pause, trying to sound indifferent.

"Well, it's partly because of your score. Twenty-seven O.W.L. marks, at the age of sixteen. That's... unheard of." Dumbledore sounded almost angry about this, and Tom's face went pink. "Tom, that would put your wizarding I.Q.--and, for that matter, your regular I.Q.--at somewhere near two hundred."

Tom felt his breath catch in his chest. "Oh..." he said, to shocked to articulate further. He swallowed. "That *has* to be a mistake... I'm not that smart..."

"You are," Dumbledore said slightly tersely. He looked at a roll of parchment in his hand--Tom could see the words "Tom M. Riddle" written at the top of it in curly handwriting. "Your Transfiguration and Arithmancy scores are through the roof, your Ancient Runes skills don't even *compare* to those of most professionals, your Potions and Herbology are far above Ordinary

Wizarding Level, your History is as high as it can go..." Dumbledore reached the final bullet on the list, and, though Tom could not read it without his reading specs, he could see that something urgent-looking had been written below it in blood-red ink. "And your knowledge of Defense Against the Dark Arts--or rather, your knowledge of the Dark Arts in themselves--is far higher than that of most Aurors. In fact, of most Light Side wizards in general."

Tom's stomach did a complete turnover. He had tried to be prudent in the Defense Against the Dark Arts section, to try and remember which tidbits of information he had got out of books and which he had got out of the lessons. But maybe he'd made a few mistakes. From the way Dumbledore was looking at him, that was probably it. Tom didn't say a word, but the first coherent words that popped into his head were, "Oh, *shit*."

Dumbledore's attention now turned to Tom's graded O.W.L. book, looking so innocent in its leather covers and pristine white pages. Dumbledore flipped to the back, to the Defense Against the Dark Arts section. "As you know," he said, "the fact that Grindelwald has indeed fallen does not mean that his influence is not still hurting the wizarding community. One of Grindelwald's worst weapons was corruption of schoolchildren, as you also know. Hence--quite recently, actually--the Ministry dragged a few Dark wizards out of Azkaban to give them information on how to perform the Dark Arts. This information was tested in the O.W.L. test, just to make sure no students actually knew any of it." Dumbledore glanced down at the book again. "You, Tom, passed that little hidden test with flying colors."

Tom's face went from red to white in an instant. He really hadn't properly remembered his sources of information, had he? One of his little voices, sounding very meek, told him it was all for the best and that Dumbledore could help him now, but this voice was quickly smothered by the other one, which seemed to want Tom to hex Dumbledore and leave Hogwarts immediately.

"There has to be some mistake," Tom wavered, knowing already that he didn't sound remotely convincing. "I'm not a Dark wizard--I don't use the Dark Arts--"

"Here," said Dumbledore, finding a test question that suited his purpose. "The question reads: 'What are the key elements necessary when performing the Cruciatus Curse?' Your answer: 'A strong, negatively-charged emotion (such as anger, pain, or fear) combined with a genuine want of causing pain in the target of the curse.' Students don't learn about the Unforgivable Curses until seventh year."

"You *know* I read ahead," Tom said swiftly.

"In textbooks only available in the Restricted Section?" Dumbledore said mildly. Tom bit his lip. "Of course," Dumbledore mused, "they *are* available down Knockturn Alley, but that doesn't say much for moral fiber either." Tom noticed that Dumbledore's usually benevolent blue eyes had acquired that harsh look they always got when he was exceptionally angry--whenever he encountered evidence of the Dark Arts. Tom hadn't seen him look this furious since his second year, when Grindelwald had turned up at the school--not even when Myrtle Potter died. Most unnerving of all was the fact that he was still perfectly deadpan--though in a way that made Tom want to walk out onto the grounds and hang himself on one of the maple trees. "I've looked at a few more of the troublesome answers, Tom. Not even a seventh-year textbook would have some of these. Most Dark wizards wouldn't know the answers to a few of them. And you got them all right. There are, of course, a few answers where you obviously blundered on purpose, but in general..."

The panic, which had started somewhere around his stomach, was now inching its way up his throat--Tom could almost feel his lunch tickling at the back of his mouth, and he felt distinctly lightheaded. "I'm going to faint," he murmured.

"You're not, Mr. Riddle. You're going to sit up straight, you're going to look me in the eye, and you're going to give me an explanation."

Forgotten were the times when Dumbledore had tried to protect him, had given him special lessons, had made not-so-subtle attempts to steer Tom back in the right direction. Now his teacher had very substantial evidence stating that Tom had been engaging in some form of illegal activity, and he was staring at the boy as though he were just like all the Dark wizards he had had to fight in his Auror days. Tom couldn't look at those furious eyes--his own blue-green ones wandered up to stare at the stained glass windows. His ancestor stared down at him from next to Ravenclaw, and Tom forced himself to look back at his teacher.

"Slytherin studied the Dark Arts, but he never practiced them," Tom said finally. His heart seemed to be pounding against his rib cage as though desperate for freedom--somehow, he expected his ribs to open like hinges and his heart to come bursting out from between his lungs. "I'm just studying them. N-nothing more."

Dumbledore gave him a cold, penetrating look. "Do you read the Times?" he asked. When Tom shook his head, Dumbledore's eyes narrowed slightly. "I do. And--years ago now--there was something in the paper about Llewellyn and Olivia Riddle dying in their house with their son Thomas. Not a mark on them, no cause of death, no sign of forced entry. Recently, Armando told me that you were named for your father. Tom is short for Thomas, isn't it?"

"I'm just Tom," Tom replied rather weakly.

"But your father was Thomas, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Tom murmured.

"He abandoned you and your mother, I understand. You never forgave him for that, did you?"

"No," Tom whispered.

Dumbledore nodded icily. "And is this Thomas Riddle *perhaps* your father?"

Silence.

"They were killed by a wizard, Tom. Any fool can see that. Now you're going to tell me which wizard that was."

Tom's mind was in a jumble. This couldn't be happening to him, it just couldn't...

Dumbledore leveled a gaze at Tom that nearly made him fall out of his seat. Tom avoided his eyes, turning his attention to the Grey Lady, who was watching from a corner. "Did you kill your father, Tom?" Dumbledore asked him quietly. "Look me in the eyes and tell me."

"I didn't kill him," Tom said immediately.

"Tom, you're looking over my shoulder. The Ravenclaw ghost has nothing to do with this discussion."

Tom forced himself to meet Dumbledore's eyes. "I didn't kill him," he repeated. He felt his voice get higher. "I didn't kill any of them. I'm studying the Dark Arts only for the backup information."

I'm not using them. I didn't kill him. Oh God..." He was nearly hyperventilating by now, and he could hear his pulse pounding in his ears.

"You look ill."

"You would too if someone was accusing you of murdering your family!" Tom said hotly, flying to his feet. His eyes were burning, and beginning to flicker with something suspiciously scarlet.

"Sit down, Tom," Dumbledore said, his voice maddeningly calm but his eyes growing more wrath-filled by the minute. "We're going to discuss this like adults."

The monster in him backed down, and Tom sank slowly back into his seat. "I don't want to go to Azkaban," Tom whispered. His voice had gone so soft it was near inaudible. "I--I don't know who killed my father. Whoever it was, it wasn't me." Somehow, this didn't feel like lying. Dumbledore gave him a searching look. "And the Dark Arts thing--I'm curious. And I want to know everything I can. I'm in Slytherin, sir, and I'm there for a reason. I'm ambitious and I'm proud, and I bend the rules because I can't see any use in them. And, unless I'm very much mistaken, your precious Gryffindors do very much the same thing."

"They do indeed," Dumbledore replied slowly. "But they don't use this rule-bending to study Dark magic."

"No, they 'use this rule-bending' to cause trouble and hurt people," Tom said quietly. "I don't hurt anyone who wasn't asking for it. *They* do it for fun."

"This isn't a question of House prejudices," Dumbledore retorted. "Your mother--I went to school with your mother. She was one of the best friends I had, and she was a Slytherin. Trahern Chapman is one of my best friends here. I have nothing against the House. No, Tom, the point here is that they're punished for pulling their pranks, but in the long run, being a prankster doesn't hurt anyone seriously. The Dark Arts will eat you up from inside--I've seen it before and I don't want to see it again. Salazar Slytherin eventually went mad, you know. Lyra Xavena--that prophetess, remember, who studied the Dark Arts when she was a little girl--she used them to kill anyone who got in her way. *Every Dark witch or wizard in the Circle of Darkness thus far has gotten started by 'just studying'*. And, as is apparent from these O.W.L. scores, it already seems like more than 'just studying' to me."

Tom stared down at his lap, tears welling in his eyes. He made a strangled choking noise in an attempt to divert a sob, but to no avail. He felt Professor Dumbledore grip his shoulder--more warning than comforting. Tom could almost feel the still-present anger in Dumbledore's eyes.

"I can't send you to Azkaban for reading books out of the Restricted Section without permission," the Professor said slowly. "For that, all I can do is take fifty points off Slytherin and give you two months detention--that is, if I'm going by the book. And an O.W.L. test and a newspaper clipping are barely enough evidence to convict you of murder, or of partaking in the Dark Arts. You're off the hook on *one condition*--you are never going back to the Restricted Section without a teacher's authorization. And if I catch wind from *any student* that you're engaging in the Dark Arts anyway--even if no one gets hurt, that's a twenty-year sentence in Azkaban right there. Because then I *will* have evidence, and prodigy or not, I'll have no choice but to ship you off to Azkaban. You have a talent here, Tom, and a great brain. If you play your cards right, you could have a great life ahead of you. You have the most potential of any young wizard I've ever educated, Tom Riddle. You'd better not waste it." With that none-too-comforting last statement, Dumbledore swept out of the Great Hall, leaving a young Lord Voldemort to sit in muffled silence.

The morning of the second of December dawned chilly and clear. The first snow of winter had fallen a few days beforehand, blanketing Hogwarts in a twinkling white drift, and the students loved to spend their afternoon skating at the lake or having snowball fights. However, as the boys in the sixth-year Slytherin dormitory quickly discovered, Hogwarts's magical heating system was having technical difficulties.

"God almighty, it's bloody freezing!" Adrian exclaimed, horrified. He leapt out of bed and into his slippers, going through his trunk frantically for his robes. "Who turned off the heat?"

"Search me," Zuhayr mumbled in response, tugging on his fourth pair of socks. "Wake up Malfoy and Zabini, will you? I'd imagine Tom's gone down to breakfast already..."

Adrian found his robes all in a cluster. He threw on all four sets and put on his heavy black cloak for good measure. "Oy! Ricky!" he yelled, hopping over to Richard's bed while attempting to tie his boot.

Richard didn't wake up--he was quite a sound sleeper--but Tom did. Bleary-eyed, he pushed his hangings aside and peered out. "What's all the commotion?" he asked sleepily. "And why's it so cold in here?"

"The house elves must have gone on strike or something," Zuhayr commented. "Not sure what it could be, really... Lord, Tom, I thought you'd be downstairs! It's nearly seven-thirty, you're usually up by four."

"I was up till five studying," Tom responded evasively. He rubbed his eyes--there were deep lavender crescents gracing his lower eyelids. Though he didn't show it, he was feeling rather elated--last night he had finished reading the last book he needed, and today he could finally get that bloody diary out of the way once and for all. Tom sluggishly dragged himself out of bed and opened his trunk. He hesitated at the Invisibility Cloak, remembering how he had always kept promising Lili that he'd return it as soon as he could. He'd just kept it after she died, not sure what to do with it. But now that his studies in the Restricted Section were nearly finished, he figured he ought to send it on back to her family. If she had any family. Sighing painfully, Tom shoved the cloak aside and tugged out a set of robes. Unlike the other two boys who were already awake, he wore only one set of everything--the cold didn't much bother him.

"OY! RICK! SHOW SOME SIGN OF LIFE!" Adrian was yelling into Richard's ear. The brown-haired boy didn't even stir, and Adrian, exasperated, seized a pillow and put it over Richard's face. Richard started thrashing around suddenly, and Adrian removed the pillow, staring down at Richard with a crooked sort of grin on his face. "There, you woke up. Congratulations." Richard gasped for air, and Adrian went down the staircase as though nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened.

Fastening his cloak, Tom straightened up and swept down the staircase, closely followed by Zuhayr. Neither one of them seemed to want to wake Francis. As Tom entered the common room, the multitudes of girls erupted with giggles. Mandy gave him what she apparently took to be a seductive smile. Tom, half-repulsed, half-panicked, rolled his eyes and strode away.

The Great Hall was populated by figures in bulging robes, cloaks, and hats pulled over their ears. A few people were wearing scarves, and Lili's old friend Courtney Gunther was actually wearing earmuffs and mittens. The teachers were decked out in similar attire, made rather more ridiculous by the fact that Professors Flitwick, Dumbledore, Camden, and Sevigny were all wearing very bright colors. Dippet was off in the hospital wing and had been for a week now--there were

rumors he'd taken ill with consumption, though Madam Viola refused to confirm it. Tom hoped he'd die of it. He wouldn't wish it on most people--Tom had seen children at the orphanage drop like flies whenever tuberculosis went around. But he very severely hated Dippet, and didn't care how much pain he was in when he died. Tom had done some research--even wizards didn't have a real cure for consumption yet. "Better keep your fingers crossed," he thought to himself bitterly.

Tom sat down heavily at the Slytherin table. The first-years, still unaccustomed to their schedules, were puzzling over their green-and-silver agenda sheets. Tom frowned. He felt extremely queasy--perhaps he was getting sick. Tom picked at his breakfast, trying to find a compromise. The mail owls flew in through the windows, as usual, and (equally typically) Tom didn't get anything. Maybe he'd be able to get out of class--he really didn't feel up to it today.

He turned his eyes to the staff table. Professor Chapman looked slightly tired, and was chatting with Professor Sevigny, who was donning a bright polka-dotted cloak. A yellow-robed Flitwick was nearby, munching on a sausage and looking quite cheerful. Dumbledore was looking rather unusual in a bright purple sombrero, which seemed to have been tugged on over a tangerine-colored stocking cap with earflaps. Right next to him was Professor Camden, who was in her usual brightly-colored array of gauze robes and had two translucent kerchiefs bound around her head. Deciding she was the best bet, Tom got to his feet and strode over. Dumbledore gave him a very penetrating look, but he did his best to ignore it.

"Professor Camden--er, Ariana?" he asked tentatively. "Can I speak with you for a moment?"

"Sure," Professor Camden replied easily. "Excuse us, Albus." Her hoop earrings jangling, the Divination professor got to her feet and led Tom off to a back room behind the Great Hall. "I got the feeling you didn't want anyone overhearing?" Camden said with a smile.

"Yes," Tom said, feeling himself redden slightly. "Look, Madam Viola's busy with Professor Dippet and I don't want to bother her unless it's an emergency, but--"

"You're feeling ill and you need someone with medical experience to make sure you're well enough for class," Professor Camden finished. "Hmm... let's take a look at you, then, eh?" She looked into his face pensively, feeling his forehead and looking into his mouth. "You haven't had enough sleep, that's obvious, and maybe you've got a touch of flu--" She stopped dead, her brown eyes widening suddenly. "Hold still," she said firmly. Tom stood up as straight as he could, and Professor Camden clamped her hands around his shoulders, staring into his face with a look of panic on her features. "You're in grave danger, Tom," she said softly. "Something's wrong--I see fire..."

"We're making bonfires in Herbology today," Tom remembered suddenly. "Burning all the dead plants to make room for the seedlings in spring. It's my first class."

"You can't go," Professor Camden said firmly. "You're standing in the middle of the fire--and there's fire inside you."

"Is there anyone else there?" Tom asked nervously.

"No one I can see," Camden responded in a whisper. "Just you--you're the only one in danger. If you go about with your plans for today the fire will ignite... Tom, you're not going to Herbology. I'll make sure Professor Sevigny knows I authorized it. Just--your best bet would be to go back to your dormitory and not do *anything* you might have planned to do. Stay in your dormitory, and whatever you do..." A strained look came over her face, as though she were concentrating.

"Whatever you do, Tom... don't talk to anyone who seems unnaturally pale. There's a pale figure

carrying a book of matches." Professor Camden fell back slightly, breathing rather hard. "I can't see anything else," she said quietly. "Just do as I say--I pray this ends well."

Tom felt extremely uncomfortable by now, and, once again, he wondered why fate always seemed to single him out for these things. "I'll do as you say, Professor," Tom replied, shifting uneasily. "There's--there's no way you or someone else could stay with me, is there?"

"I have classes," Professor Camden sighed, "and everyone else does as well. Maybe Nearly Headless Nick will do it."

As it happened, Nick was unwilling to go anywhere near the Slytherin common room. ("I'm sure there are charms up to prevent my entry," Nick had said delicately.) The only ghost willing to do the job was the Grey Lady--even the Bloody Baron wasn't interested. Camden shooed Tom and the Grey Lady up the stairs to Slytherin Tower, then ran off to tell Professor Sevigny that Tom couldn't come to class.

"She seems worried," commented the Grey Lady, as Tom spoke the password to enter the Slytherin common room.

Tom didn't answer. He sat down in an armchair by the empty grate, tugging his cloak tighter around him. "Wonder why it's gone so cold today?" he mused.

"Ogg's having trouble with the furnaces," the Grey Lady said immediately, brushing a silvery lock of hair out of her eyes. "Nothing unusual, actually--this used to happen all the time when I was at school. Luckily, I can't feel a thing, so it doesn't bother me." She hesitated. "I saw you and Albus arguing about a month ago and I never got the chance to ask either of you about it," she added quietly. "What was that about?"

Tom sighed. "I was a bit angry they didn't call my name for the O.W.L. thing," he lied swiftly. "I didn't like being embarrassed like that, see. Everyone thought I'd failed or been expelled or something."

"I don't think Albus ever *could* expel you," the Grey Lady commented. "You always have been his favorite."

Tom gave a sarcastic laugh. "Right, and I'm Cinde-bloody-rella."

"You are, though," the Grey Lady put in seriously. Tom snorted, and the Grey Lady allowed herself a small smile before going straight-faced again. "His favorite, I mean. But he does worry about you. I hear him talk to himself sometimes, asking himself what's to become of you and other such things."

Electra Andes's little white cat rubbed against Tom's legs, begging for attention; Tom scooped it up and started petting it absently. He sighed into the cat's fur. "I really hate this." The Grey Lady gave him a questioning look. "You know--being special. Being different. Everyone pays attention to what I'm doing like they're waiting for me to bung it up--people worry about me. Stupid things happen to me. All my friends seem to drop dead the minute I start to love them too much. I have all these special talents; people call me a wunderkind and all sorts of other inane things. And now Professor Camden thinks I'm going to end up a human bonfire. I must say, it gets rather annoying after a while."

The Grey Lady was silent for a while, listening without a word. She ran a hand over the cat's fur--shivering in the sudden cold, the little creature bolted.

"I almost know how you feel," she said gently.

Tom felt like kicking himself--here he was, wasting time moping and complaining. He was starting to remind himself of Myrtle Potter. "Do something with your time," he instructed himself. His thoughts suddenly returned to the diary upstairs. "I'm going to go do some work," he announced. "Let me know if anyone comes in, all right?"

"All right," the Grey Lady replied. Tom gave her a sad, weary smile and trudged up the stairs to his dormitory. It would be the last genuine smile of his life.

Tom kicked open his trunk and gathered up all the books from the Restricted Section. With some effort, he managed to get the diary to the top of the pile, and he drew his wand out after all this was done. Tom strained his memory, trying to remember exactly which brick to tap. In his nighttime wanderings with Lili all those years ago, she and he had stumbled upon a tower-top courtyard above Slytherin tower, accessible in each of the rooms by tapping a particular brick with one's wand and murmuring "*Dissendium*." Tom remembered after a few moments, singled out the brick, and tapped on it with his wand, muttering the spell. There was a gentle rumbling sound, and a set of stone steps plummeted down from the middle of the ceiling. Tom scrambled up the staircase, waving his wand again. The staircase vanished behind him, leaving solid ground--and only now did he look up at the courtyard around him.

Seeing it again made his heart skip a beat. It was a very elaborate courtyard, surrounded on all sides by battlements and full of beautiful statuary. Above him was open air, and below him was a flagged stone pathway that had somehow avoided being covered by snow. At the very center of the courtyard was a fountain, frozen for now, but Tom knew from experience that it would be burbling and splashing by springtime. Lord, how he and Lili had adored this place. Off at the other end, Tom could see a statue of a burly-looking wizard--Lili had tied her favorite pink scarf around the statue's neck and had never taken it away. Sure enough, it was still there--significantly greyed and quite tattered, but still there. It was perhaps the place's secluded familiarity that made Tom want to work here--indeed, he had been planning on working on this up here all along.

Sighing heavily, Tom threw down his books, seized a quill, and started writing in his diary.

"...and hence," Professor Camden was saying, "the properties of the goose's liver are useless if not used in conjunction with the kidneys. Are there any questions?"

She looked around at all her third-years, who were staring down at their dead geese as though the things had leprosy. One of them, a Slytherin girl called Corvina Malfoy, raised her hand tentatively. "Do we actually have to cut these things open?" she asked, looking ill.

Professor Camden laughed. "Yes, Corvina, you actually have to cut these things open. Now say the appropriate charms over your birds, and I'll come around with yours scalpels." The third-years groaned and drew out their wands, and the professor made her way back to her desk, searching for the box of scalpels.

She was overcome by a sudden, dizzying headache--so painful she had to sit down. Professor Camden shut her eyes, feeling that familiar nausea and trying not to shudder. For the second time today, she saw that awful picture--the Riddle boy standing in the center of a field of flames, with tendrils of fire extending from his heart. There, again, was that white-faced figure, holding a match, and off in the distance stood a little boy with his chest torn open, blood seeping from the rip.

Camden shivered and tried to blink the picture away, but it wouldn't leave. "Too late to save him," the white-faced figure laughed, and the image started to fade. Camden was panicking by

now. Surely Tom wasn't doing something he'd planned to do? She'd done everything she could--he had planned to go to class, and he wasn't going to class. But perhaps he had been planning to do something later, and he was doing it now because of the time he'd been given... A laugh from the pale figure told her she was right, and she burst out uncontrollably, causing her third-years to give her shocked looks.

"Oh, ---- ! Ariana Camden, you *idiot*, what have you done?!"

Tom finished writing with a flourish and stared down at the diary. He was feeling rather more congested and nauseous by now, but he didn't care--he wanted to get this done. The first few pages contained very pessimistic notes about his life and personality--though he did mention the charisma he seemed to possess, especially around girls, just because he thought it might not be best to have the diary's finder hate him. After this, he had written pages and pages about the Chamber of Secrets, trying his best to sound as though he had enjoyed doing it immensely. There was information on basilisks and information on the Chamber's location. The diary contained only a bare-bones interpretation of himself, with all the better parts of his personality left out. Tom figured it was the softer side of his personality that made him chicken out about the Chamber in the first place. The Tom he wrote into the diary hated Dumbledore rather than feared him, enjoyed murder and hated Rubeus, and had never had a real friend in his life. It seemed almost nothing like him, but Tom wasn't sure that was a bad thing. It would take a very ruthless Tom to open the Chamber of Secrets, not one who feared detection and hated killing.

All that was left now was the magic.

Tom had spent hours last night trying to find the correct incantation. When a perfect match could not be found, Tom combined a few of them and used his rune magic to make it fit. Sighing, Tom set the diary on a nearby chess table and picked up his wand. With an alarming edge to his voice that should have concerned him right away, Tom aimed his wand down at the diary and began reciting from memory.

"Who now shall know of darkness curbed
To be born of the sap of dreams,
And kept in silence till disturbed
By one whose kindness freely streams?
Who now shall know of welcoming hearts
Whose naïveté shall drag them down?
Of thoughts from masters far apart
Once innocence is overthrown?
Who now shall know that from this book
A siege of minds might overtake?
The book holds tight to what it took;
Imperious thoughts are hard to shake.
The secret's made, the ink is gone--
You think it's ended? God, you're wrong."

At first, nothing seemed to have happened. A wanton breeze played at the pages of the diary--and then it became apparent that they had gone blank. Tom breathed a sigh of relief, then edged toward the diary. Tentatively, he prodded it with his wand.

Professor Camden skidded to a halt outside the Slytherin common room. Her heart going like mad, Professor Camden banged on the canvas and the wall around the canvas, hoping to get the

Grey Lady's attention. "Lady! Lady!" she shouted, trying desperately to ignore the all-too-familiar gut feeling that this wasn't going to work. "Lady, help me!"

The Grey Lady drifted through the portrait, looking concerned but calm. "Ariana?" she asked incredulously. "Don't you have a class--?"

"I left Corvina Malfoy in charge--she's a clever girl, they'll be fine without me," Professor Camden said impatiently. "Lady, I *need* the password--Tom might be in trouble and I need to help him before he does anything that might hurt him..."

The Grey Lady wrinkled her transparent brow. "I think Tom said it was 'Prævideus'," she said after a moment. Professor Camden, who was well-learned in Latin, nonetheless didn't even mention the irony.

"Prævideus," Professor Camden said promptly, and the wood nymph swung her portrait aside, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like "cheater". The Grey Lady led the very flustered Divination professor up the boys' staircase, still calm and collected. However, when they reached the sixth-year boys' dormitory, even the austere ghost was beginning to panic.

Tom's trunk was flung open, his books scattered all over the floor and a shimmering Invisibility Cloak lying across the flagstones like a puddle of quicksilver. And Tom was nowhere to be found.

It all seemed to happen within a few seconds. There was a flash of violent red light, and Tom saw everything go black for a split second. He blinked frantically, looking wildly around, and realized he was in something of a dungeon. He had the odd feeling that he was dreaming--as though his limbs weren't really moving, as though he were simply a spirit. His wand was still tight in his grasp, but he could almost tell that his eyelids were still covering his eyes. In fact, despite the fact that he perceived himself to be standing up in the middle of a dungeon, he was somehow aware that he was lying spread-eagled on the ground somewhere else entirely. He had to be dreaming this. There was an utterly nightmarish feeling about the whole thing, and those oubliette-style walls felt hauntingly familiar. "Lord," he thought, "this is just out of one of my dreams... all that's missing is the--"

The Specter was waiting for him at the end of the room, a smile upon his lipless face. "Welcome," the Specter said in a mock-warm voice. The grating sound of the Specter's speech sounded clearer--less dreamlike--than it ever had before. "Welcome, Tom Marvolo Riddle, to the prison that is your mind. And no, Tom, you're not dreaming. You're in a trance. There's a difference."

Tom's hand clenched tighter around his wand.

The Specter cocked its head, seeming to read his mind. "Tom, I'd really prefer if you stopped thinking of me as the Specter," he said lazily. "My name's Vires Ultio--though the name you subconsciously tend to attach to me is Lord Voldemort."

"I'm Voldemort," Tom said, though his voice came out sounding rather misty and far-off.

"Formally, yes," Vires Ultio explained casually. "But no, not exactly. Part of you is Lord Voldemort--that being the part that wants power and revenge. I am the embodiment of the Lord Voldemort half of your psyche. My little nemesis, Fides Studium, is the part of your mind that would rather have love and friendship--the way your mind was when you were a very small

child." Vires Ultio spoke these words disdainfully, as though saying them made him want to spit. His white face shimmered in the half-light. "We're your two little voices, as you like to call us. Your consciences. I live on your right, Fides Studium lives on your left."

Tom blinked. "Erm--oh," he said flatly. He decided to go along with it--after all, he'd wake up from this demented little dream eventually, and then life would be back to normal. Right?

"You're not dreaming," a second voice came suddenly. Tom whirled around--standing behind him was a battered, bruised little twelve-year-old boy, wrapped in an old cloak and wearing dusty old robes. Tom recognized the face immediately--the turquoise eyes, wide with pleading and fear, mirrored his own. "Tom, please, this isn't a dream... you've been working your way toward this meeting ever since Hannah Hiddy died, maybe even before that. This diary thing was the last straw--we're done fighting with each other, we're done giving you nightmares. We've both accepted that it's your choice."

"My head hurts and this doesn't make any sense and I want to go home," Tom said in one breath.

Vires Ultio shot Fides Studium a wicked smile. "Perhaps I ought to explain my half of it?"

"I'll explain first," the little wraith said firmly. "Sit down, Tom. The floor will do." Still hopelessly confused, Tom sat down. The little version of him sat down opposite him, crossing his legs, but Vires Ultio preferred to remain standing. Sighing, and glancing hopelessly up at Vires Ultio, Fides Studium began.

"Ever since you were little," he said, "you've had emotions. And, due to your situation, much of this was anger, sadness, a longing for power. Correct?" Tom nodded, and Fides Studium went on. "Every person is born with two consciences. One of them is Machiavellian--it tells you to do anything to advance yourself, and to take revenge. The other wants you to obey the rules and lead a quiet, happy life without confrontation. Most people pay more attention to the latter, but you, Tom--" Fides Studium sighed heavily. "Tom, you've had too much reason to obey Vires Ultio. You, as a person, are angry, fiery, proud, independent, and withdrawn. You yourself have always wanted to gain revenge on those who have wronged you--and you've always wanted power, but you've never been sure which kind. But on the other hand... On the other hand, you have loved, and you have lost. You know what it means to have your heart broken, and you know what it means to enjoy the love of another. Tom, *some part of you* has always wanted to have a normal life--to grow up and get married, and be happy with your lot in life.

"Tom, you're familiar with the arguments Vires Ultio and I have been having. Both of us are guilty of attempting to take over your personality for brief periods of time, of trying to make you see that our way is the only way. During one particularly nasty argument back in your fifth year, Vires Ultio sent a Burning Hex at me--as I was in charge of your personality at the time, my burns were your burns. Do you remember that?"

Tom's stomach turned at the memory. "I'll not forget that for the rest of my life," he said quietly.

"And then, of course, there was that time when Dumbledore accidentally sucked me out of your brain," Vires Ultio put in with a roll of the eyes. "Fides Studium did his best to block me out, but it didn't work, did it, you little brat?" He sneered this last part to Fides Studium himself, who shrank away from Vires Ultio's foot as though expecting a kick. "You know damn well that a body can't live long without the balance provided by the darker conscience--he was damn near jumping out the window, thinking he could bloody fly. Remember?"

"Oh, and someone can live without the lighter conscience?" Fides Studium fired back, as Tom watched in bewilderment. "Sure, they can *live*, but what kind of life is it?"

"OKAY," Tom said loudly, and the two spirits stopped arguing. "What exactly was the point of bringing me here?"

"Tom, it's gotten to the point where you've turned into two entirely different people," Fides Studium said grimly. "One of them is Tom Marvolo Riddle, sensitive and moody, prickly on the outside, beloved of the teachers, desperate for friendship, with a bit of a temper but nothing too extravagant. He wants to have a long and happy life, to teach at Hogwarts when he grows up or something along those lines. He wants to forget all about his bad experiences and live to be remembered fondly."

"The other," continued Vires Ultio in an easy voice, "is Lord Voldemort, ambitious and powerful, a true Slytherin who's not afraid to fight for what he wants. He doesn't need friends--he already knows what having friends can do to a person. He knows he's the best wizard in centuries, and he wants to prove it. He wants people to look up to him, to fear him, and he wants to gain revenge on those who have wronged him because they deserve it more than anything."

"And you can't go on switching between the two," Fides Studium finished. "Tom Riddle wrote the diary, but Lord Voldemort lives in it."

Tom's head was hurting worse than ever by now. "So, what, I have to choose one of them?"

Vires Ultio nodded eagerly. "If you pick Lord Voldemort, the spirit of power and revenge can take you to greatness. And this pesky little brat here--the very *reason* you have felt pain in your life--will vanish forever. I am Lord Voldemort's conscience--if Lord Voldemort survives this encounter, he will be the next member of the Circle of Darkness. There is more power to be gained there than anywhere else, Tom. Please."

"Do you really want to be a Dark wizard?" Fides Studium cried frantically. "That isn't happiness! Power isn't happiness! Isn't love more important to you? Think about it, Tom--think about that euphoria you felt when Lord Voldemort killed your father, and compare it to the euphoria you felt when you were with Lili. Hate versus love. Power versus devotion. Tom Riddle is the twelfth member of the Circle of Light. Which do you prefer?"

Pictures, voices, and emotions were swimming through Tom's mind. As though watching from a window, he saw Lili running across the grounds with him, holding tightly to his hand. The scene shifted sharply--now he was watching himself at Lili's funeral, kneeling by the just-filled grave and tearfully tracing out the letters of her name on the tombstone. Next, it was Hannah--he watched a small, scruffy-looking version of himself waving Hannah goodbye and running off toward Platform Nine and three-quarters. Finally, he stared in from the window in a maternity ward, watching his dying mother gazing down at him lovingly, rocking him gently in her arms.

Love always brought pain. There was no denying it. It was agony to remember it. Avoiding love--that was the best way to avoid pain.

But what about revenge? Murder? The act itself was marvelously entertaining--the only drawback was the guilt, but come to think of it, that awful little Fides Studium had been the one to cause that. Fides Studium caused him to love and it caused him to feel guilt--was there anything the idiot *didn't* do wrong?

Now, power--there was something he could actually use. It didn't cause you pain, and it was always rewarding. And Tom Riddle wanted to be a teacher when he grew up? What was there to be gained from that? Really, power was the only way to gain happiness. Love was agony. Power couldn't burn you like that.

And speaking of burning...

"I feel warm," Tom commented suddenly. He wasn't sure how to explain it--though the dungeon was freezing, the real him--the physical him--was warm and getting warmer. Something was the matter...

"Oh God," Fides Studium said suddenly. "He's an Olwyn--high-stress decisions like this... he might be having random convulsions of magic, anything could happen now--"

"Make your decision," Vires Ultio said sharply. "Am I to sink into near-silence and make way for the *great* Tom Riddle? Or shall we expel this pesky, unnecessary little excuse for a conscience and bring Lord Voldemort to power?"

Tom looked up from his hands. His eyes were glimmering scarlet, nearly casting a light of their own. "I have no use for love," he said, a smirk playing at his lips. "May Lord Voldemort's reign begin."

Fides Studium made a sudden gasping noise. His chest seemed to have ripped open of its own accord--he clutched the wound with a look of intense pain on his face. "Tom--Tom, NO!" He whirled around blindly, then turned to the both of them. "I'm not dying this easily," he cried. His promise seemed all talk--something bubbly and blackish-red was dribbling out of his mouth. "I am still the heart and the soul of the twelfth member of the Circle of Light--I'll find another host in my own time!" He was flickering into oblivion by now, but his last words were chiseled into Tom's mind--he would never forget them. "You've heard it before and you'll hear it again--beware a potter's son!"

The little boy vanished, never to return. Vires Ultio reached down and helped Tom to his feet.

Trahern Chapman gave the ghost and the Divination professor a very bewildered look. It wasn't every day that the Grey Lady and Professor Camden turned up outside his classroom door, saying that his star pupil had gone missing.

"He's just--gone? Without the slightest shadow of a trace?" he asked, regarding them critically. "How can you--how can you be sure? Did you look everywhere?"

"Everywhere," the Grey Lady said solemnly. "He's not dead, I'd know it if he were dead--was there perhaps a secret passage in the dormitory?"

Professor Chapman's eyes widened. "There's--there's *one*," he said slowly. "Salazar Slytherin kept a private courtyard on top of Slytherin Tower--only the heads of Slytherin House have ever known about it. Perhaps Riddle stumbled on it at some point and..."

"You know where it is, then," Professor Camden gasped. "Take us there, for God's sake!"

"I know a shortcut through one of the dungeons," Professor Chapman said with a sigh. "Hold on a moment, I'll have to leave someone in charge of my class."

"I'll take care of them," the Grey Lady said urgently. "You two find that passage--I can't stand to think what might be happening to him..." The three parties separated; the two humans running in one direction, the ghost sliding into Professor Chapman's Potions room.

Both professors were flushed and exhausted by the time they reached the correct dungeon. Chapman, who knew his way around, shoved aside a large painting of a pony that had been

leaning against the wall. This revealed a small, dank passageway. "You first," Chapman said breathlessly. Camden didn't need telling twice--she dove into the passage and dashed up the stone staircase. Chapman marked her closely. It felt like hours before the stairs finally ended, and their way was blocked by a stone trap door. He drew out his wand.

Camden suddenly went rigid. "Do you smell smoke?" she asked feebly.

Chapman decided it was best not to answer that. "*Alohomora*," he said. The trap door flew open, and the two professors were looking up at a billowing canopy of smoke. The smell of burning plants and smoldering soil filled their nostrils. Camden immediately ran the rest of the way up the steps, looking around wildly. Chapman emerged soon after, and he turned pale at what he saw.

The old courtyard was alive with flames. The smoke was so thick neither he nor Camden could see more than a foot or two in front of their noses, but it was enough for Chapman to see a small, smoke-stained scarf fluttering around a statue's neck, sparks slowly consuming it. Chapman could barely move, but Camden immediately dove around the flames, searching madly for any sign of Tom. Within seconds, a cry of relief told Chapman she had been successful, and coming out of his trance, he started after her.

The boy was lying in the middle of the pathway in a sea of books, his wand lying in his lax left palm. His face was stained by smoke, and he was barely breathing--but at least he was alive and unburned. Chapman seized Tom's wand--no time to save the books. Chapman helped Camden hoist Tom to his feet by his upper arms--as quickly as they could, they half-walked, half-dragged him out of the courtyard and down the stairs.

Once they were back on level ground, the two professors laid their charge out on the floor. He was more unconscious than anything else, though he did keep twitching in a very unnerving way. Chapman hurried off to find help, and Camden stayed behind--unaware that it was all too late, unaware that, even after all that, she had failed.

Within a few minutes, a Hufflepuff girl had rushed in from Herbology class and alerted everyone that the school was on fire.

Voldemort saw something bright in his line of vision. It looked like a silver thumbnail--"or the moon, you idiot," he added to himself. That was what it had to be. And that would also explain those little white pinpoints of light all around it.

Why was he so cold when it felt like just a minute before he'd been quite warm?

Worried faces hovered all around--"That one's Twiddly," he reminded himself, "and there's Flitwick, and Chapman, and Camden, and Madam Viola, I think... Dumbledore's upside-down."

"He's awake!" Madam Viola cried. "Everyone back off, the boy needs air!"

Beyond the initial faces, Voldemort could see pale-faced Slytherins and shocked-looking Ravenclaws--he imagined the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were there too, but he couldn't see them yet. Or maybe they were off doing something else. Aching, he moved his arms and pushed himself into a sitting position. Why had he been lying in the snow out on the lawn? Before he'd passed out, he had been in Slytherin Tower's courtyard...

"What the hell is going on?" Voldemort asked slowly.

"Slytherin Tower's nearly burned to the ground," Dumbledore said quietly. "You were up in the courtyard, remember?"

"Burned to the *ground*?"

"The Slytherins are being given a new common room in the largest of the dungeons, and we'll be building dormitories as soon as we can," Dumbledore went on. "The Ministry's fire squad is still fighting the fire, but they've managed to contain it so far. Slytherin Tower is the only part of the building that's been harmed."

"I'd just gone up there to study a bit," Voldemort half-lied. It was all coming back to him--he had to keep all suspicion off him. "Didn't want to waste my sick day--then I think something must have hit me in the head... or maybe I had a seizure..."

"We don't know what it was, Tom," Professor Chapman sighed. "All we know is that someone set that fire. Maybe you did by accident--Olwyns are prone to seizures like that when they're under stress, and they can sometimes do things like that without knowing it."

"I knew that," Voldemort said carelessly.

"And Professor Dippet's passed on," Dumbledore said, staring into the snow. "The shock of hearing that the school was burning was too much for him, he was already in a delicate state."

"A pity." Voldemort had to try very hard not to laugh at the news. He turned to the nurse, who was fussing over him. "I'm fine, Madam Viola," he said in a rather exasperated voice.

Dumbledore was giving him an odd look, and Madam Viola, too, seemed shocked that anyone could be so blasé about all this. However, she backed down nonetheless, a very uncertain look on her face. The teachers all got up and started shooing the students away, leaving Voldemort alone with Dumbledore.

"Is there something the matter?" Dumbledore asked sharply, his eyes roving over Voldemort's neutral mouth.

The boy's handsome face twitched into a false smile. "I'm perfectly all right, sir," Voldemort smirked. "Are we sleeping outside until the fire's put out, or was I lying in the snow to make a snow angel?"

"Sleeping bags have been laid out in the greenhouses," Dumbledore responded, narrowing his eyes at Voldemort. "Dinner is being prepared on the Herbology bonfires outside. Ironic."

"Indeed." Voldemort turned his laughing eyes toward the school and watched the men on broomsticks fire jets of water through their wands in an attempt to stave the blaze. "I'll stay here a while--go on ahead, Professor."

Dumbledore walked away, shooting Voldemort half a glance over his shoulder. Voldemort's thoughts turned to his belongings. Those books from the Restricted Section had been burned in the fire, and perhaps it was for the best. His wand--someone had placed that in his pocket. But what of the diary? No one would have salvaged that for him, surely.

He suddenly noticed a bulge in his inside cloak pocket. Checking it, Voldemort discovered his diary--blank-paged and immaculate.

"Excellent," Voldemort murmured, and he turned and followed the other students toward the bonfires.

26. Only the Beginning

It had been a year and a half since the Slytherin Tower fire, and even in that space of time Hogwarts had changed drastically. All the Slytherins had to send for new things, as they all had been destroyed in the fire, and Lili Po's old Invisibility Cloak had likely been lost as well. Nepenthe had vanished completely. Unable to scrape together enough Ministry funding to rebuild the tower itself, the Hogwarts staff had been forced to commission architects and builders to make a few makeshift underground dormitories near the provisional Slytherin common room. It was an unpleasant and chilly arrangement, but no one seemed to care except the Slytherins themselves. Voldemort cynically thought that if it had been Gryffindor Tower to burn to the ground, it would have been rebuilt and refurbished immediately. But no matter. He liked the cold, even if his fellow Slytherins did not.

He had found out that he had been made Head Boy at the very beginning of his seventh year. Voldemort thought this was rather odd, considering that Albus Dumbledore, the new Headmaster, had always seemed to dislike him. But the position would look good on his résumé, and it gave him an unaccustomed position of power. The Head Girl was Serena Birch, elder sister to that useless little whore Mandy, who still rather liked following him around. Voldemort spent most of his seventh year making plans for the future. He planned to never again correspond with those people who had been his friends in his earlier school years--they were too happy, too pleasant, for him to have any use for them.

No, he intended to completely abandon this life after finishing two years of postgraduate school and settling a few old scores. Once that business was taken care of, he planned to pack his things and head off to Transylvania, which was, to Dark Arts connoisseurs, known as the center of the Dark Rebellion. He would perfect the Dark Arts there, and after a few years, begin gathering followers. His aim was to overthrow magical government, to eliminate Muggles, and most of all, to defeat the one thing he perceived as having power over him. Death. Power must be his and his alone--though he would give his followers the idea that they were to have a bit of his power just to keep them motivated. He already had a few followers here--Corvina Malfoy, Francis's younger half-sister, seemed fascinated by Voldemort's ideas, and many of the younger Ravenclaws and Slytherins seemed to look up to him. But these followers would not be enough--he needed far more than this. Hundreds. Thousands.

Lord Voldemort knew he was going to be great, and, without the burden of a conscience, he knew precisely how he was going to go about it. How wonderful life was going to be.

It was the last day of term.

Albus Dumbledore looked around at all the eager faces in the Great Hall. The Gryffindors were flushed with pride, having finally won the House Cup for the first time in eight years. The hall looked beautiful, decked out in scarlet and gold, and even the Slytherins seemed to be enjoying the end-of-term banquet despite all this. The students on the Honor Roll had all been called--Tom Riddle, as usual, had been the best in his year. Albus's heart sank slightly as his thoughts turned to the boy, and he glanced at the Slytherin table uneasily.

Everyone was wearing their best dress robes, but Albus was beginning to notice that Slytherins generally liked the colors black, brown, green, and blue the best. Only Larkin Mallory was wearing a bright color--her robes were brilliant orange. But then again, Larkin's sanity was rather questionable. Albus scanned the crowd of Slytherins and found Tom Riddle almost immediately,

wearing green and black and talking rather languidly with a fourth-year brunette called Corvina Malfoy. Tom's golden Head Boy badge must have gotten lost somewhere in the folds of his robes--either that or he simply didn't want to wear it. There was a slight smile playing at his lips, and he was listening to Corvina with something not unlike amusement.

Albus sighed. Was he the only one who had noticed how very much Tom had changed? In the year and a half since the incident in the Slytherin Tower courtyard, Tom had transformed almost completely from a fiery, oversensitive teenaged boy to a quiet, austere, and charismatic young man. To be quite honest, Albus much preferred the former--even though Tom now showed no signs of engaging in Dark activity, Albus got the impression that that particular situation was getting progressively worse. At least the old Tom was obvious about his emotions, and it was much easier to tell when he was feeling guilty or afraid. And at least there was a faint shadow of a chance that Albus might be able to save the old Tom. Now, the boy seemed a hopeless case.

"And now he's leaving school," Albus thought. "God knows what he's going to do once he's out of Hogwarts."

Albus had spent a considerable amount of time researching the death of Tom's father--really, it had been the perfect crime. Only one person had seen him, that person being the Riddles' gardener. How he had avoided further detection, Albus could only guess. Perhaps he had managed to blend in by turning himself into a cat. Albus cursed himself for ever teaching him how to do that. Or maybe the boy had an Invisibility Cloak--either way, it seemed perfectly obvious that Tom had done it. But of course, without evidence, without any fingerprints, even... "What a waste," Albus mused. Tom had to be the most brilliant student Hogwarts had ever seen--how could he even dream of throwing away his life like that?

But maybe Albus was wrong--maybe Tom wasn't going to end up ruining his life after all. Deep down, Albus knew it wasn't true, but he wished it were. It had been disappointing enough when Lili Po--probably the cleverest and nicest girl he'd taught to date--had been lost in that freak attack. But Tom... there had always been something special about that boy. When he was young, he had always had a funny little lost look about him, like the world was moving too quickly and he was caught in the middle of it. And yet he had been clever, brilliant--far more than any other children Albus had ever taught. There was a certain, curious enigma about him from the start, something Albus had always liked. But now, the curiosity had turned to shrewdness, that brilliance was likely being used for something other than studies, and that childish forlorn look was gone forever. His best pupil was free falling into the Dark Arts and Albus didn't have any proof--all he could do was watch helplessly.

For the thousandth time, Albus asked himself the same question. "Oh, Riddle--what's to become of you, boy?" he murmured.

Though he had a rather good guess, if he had known the true answer to his question he would probably have killed Tom on the spot.

Adar Danaru sighed and leaned back in his chair, unfolding his copy of *The Netherworld Weekly* and taking a sip from his nettle wine. It was twilight in early August of 1952 (which, though Adar didn't know it, was directly after Voldemort's graduation from postgraduate school), and the owner of Danaru's Magical Accessories was tired and bored. Knockturn Alley didn't usually get many customers in the first place, but today had been an exceptionally slow day. All Adar had had to do all day was dole out a pair of Hands of Glory to some rosy-faced ex-Gryffindors who wanted to try their hands at robbing Gringotts. "Cocky little bastards, they were," he thought.

Thinking they could rob Gringotts--honestly, what kind of idiots thought they could pull off a stunt like that? But these adventurers aside, Adar had spent most of his day sorting his books and listening to the wireless. A little silver owl had just delivered his newspaper, which offered some well-needed relief from the day's ennui.

"YET MORE PROPHECIES OF THE DARK MESSIAH'S COMING", the headlines blared. Adar rolled his eyes. Dark prophets and prophetesses had been heralding the coming of the Dark Heir for ages now--it had to be years. And yet, they had seen no real sign. Huge cults of people believed the prophecies, but Adar was among the minority of Dark wizards who thought the whole thing was a load of tosh. Sure, everyone missed their beloved Grindelwald, but Adar preferred to look at it realistically. Most members of the Circle of Darkness were spaced by at least fifty years--here it had only been seven, and already everyone was praying for the twelfth. Besides, if he really were the Dark Messiah, why hadn't he shown his face yet?

A bell rang at the front of the shop, and Adar quickly threw down his paper. He heard light, sauntering footsteps echo slightly among the shelves, and the newcomer turned around and closed the door behind him before advancing. He was hidden away by the shadows, as the only light in the whole shop came from a rusty copper chandelier hovering directly above Adar's head. However, Adar could hear the newcomer's robes swishing gently, and from the sound of the footsteps it had to be a man.

"Welcome to Danaru's," Adar said.

No reply--the footsteps continued.

Adar cleared his throat. "*Welcome to Danaru's*," he repeated, rather more loudly.

Still no response, but the person stopped walking for an instant, directly across from Adar's desk. After a few moments, the stranger recovered. He strode forward, the light casting chilly shadows across his face. He had to be only about twenty. His face was thin and marble-pale, framed with straight coal-black hair, and opalescent eyes glittered from under obsidian eyelashes.

Adar brushed his dark brown hair out of his face and adjusted his glasses. "Is there something you need, young man?" the shopkeeper prompted. "Or are you just looking around?"

"I'm not sure," the young man responded. He had a voice that called to mind both ice and fire, and his eyes glimmered slightly. Adar watched as the customer placed a spidery, gloved hand on the counter and took another step forward. His sharp, attractive face came into clearer view. "I am planning an endeavor--a journey to Transylvania."

Adar had never known that someone with a light Irish accent could sound so threatening, but the young man pulled it off quite nicely. Seeming to sense that Adar was uncomfortable, the young man's left hand rested itself lazily at his belt, one leather-gloved finger toying with the handle of his wand.

"I see," Adar said nervously, though he was already feeling rather annoyed. "Well, I can't make any recommendations just on those grounds, you know. I'd suggest some strong anti-Dark equipment if you're going vampire hunting, but naturally my suggestions would shift slightly if you were going off for tea with your Mummy."

The young man allowed himself an easy smile. "I'm going to meet with some of the greatest Dark Arts masters in the world and sharpen my skills as best I can. My ultimate goal is to gain power, of course."

Adar thought a moment. "There are enchantments and such--things that may enhance your magic, at a cost. I could show you some of those."

The young man impatiently waved a hand. "The costs are intelligence and physical ability--the former of which I am certainly unwilling to lose. My powers are adequate as they are." He didn't say any more, but he quite plainly added, *Are you saying they're not good enough already? Do you want me to prove you wrong?*

Adar shifted positions with a shiver, not quite sure he wanted to make this one angry. "There are books--"

"Which I have bought in other places already," the young man said coldly. He was thrumming the fingers of his right hand on the marble of the counter by now, something Adar noticed quite suddenly.

"Ahh... there are Invisibility Enchantments," Adar squeaked, starting to get desperate. "Cursed jewelry--we have a map of Europe that will automatically dispense your stormtroopers to any unprotected location--"

"The Invisibility Enchantments and the map may come in helpful," the young man mused. The smirk playing at his lips was growing wider, to Adar's further unease. "I'll take those, if you don't mind."

"Of course, sir," Adar sighed with relief, bending over and drawing the map from behind the counter. "As for the Invisibility Enchantments, would you rather the cloak, the potion, or the pendant?"

"The pendant is the most convenient," the customer mused aloud. "That will do." He watched Adar place a luminous golden pendant on the counter, his lazy smile growing more sardonic by the instant. "Anything else you have to offer?"

Adar glanced into the display case again. "Well, ahh..." Seeing something promising, he straightened up again, trying to inject some confidence into his voice. "There is, of course, the Mask."

"It has no other name but the Mask?" the young man smirked, looking more amused than ever.

"No one bothered to give it any other name."

"And, pray tell, what does it do?" the stranger queried, his voice ironic and mocking.

Adar drew himself up. "It covers your whole face," he said, "and it will strike fear into the hearts of your enemies and your followers. This fear as strong and powerful as the pain inflicted by the Cruciatus Curse. If it is power you want, all you have to do is put on the Mask and your enemies will be on their knees." He paused, watching a glimmer of interest flash across the young man's face. "There is only one danger caused by the Mask, and it is this--if ever it is worn during the murder of one who is pure of heart, the Mask will remain forever, its powers weakened and your true face eternally lost."

"I'll use it with caution then," the young man laughed. "I'll take it."

Adar secretly thought that the other man was frightening enough as it was, but did not voice this opinion. He drew the Mask out of its display case and held it out to the youth. It was made of immaculate white silk, almost laughably pure when compared to the usual intent of its use. He

laid it on the counter with the young man's other purchases, and drew back from it sharply as it suddenly twitched.

"How much will that be, then?" the lad inquired lazily.

Adar tallied up the prices, and he went rather pale. "Seventy Galleons," he said quietly. The other man looked about to fly into a rage, but Adar held up a hand to silence him. "It's not negotiable, before you ask. Haggle all you want, the price still stands."

The young man's left hand, which had been fiddling with the wand-handle the whole time, suddenly clenched around the wand and tugged it from the belt. Before Adar could get to his own, the unwelcome visitor had his wand aimed straight at Adar's chest.

"Still sure you don't want to negotiate?" the young man said sweetly. "I've killed people before, and for lesser reasons. I know spells that could rip you open from the inside, and others that could shrivel up your internal organs so slowly and painfully that you'd die screaming."

"This is armed robbery!" Adar cried.

"Not precisely--more along the lines of seizing the moment." There was a scarlet glint in the boy's eyes by now--something anyone affiliated with the Dark Arts would recognize from the prophecies in an instant.

Adar backed away until he was up against the wall, watching the sadistic look on the young man's face and trying to think about his wife and children at home. "I'm going to live, I'm going to live, I'm going to live!" Adar insisted to himself desperately. "Just because he's the Dark Messiah and he's angry with me doesn't mean I have to die... Oh God--"

"*Consumptus Viscera*," the youth murmured.

He strode out of the shop, completely ignoring the cries of pain behind him.

Sunrise.

Voldemort glanced at the amber-painted windowpane lazily, his right hand resting on a stack of old newspapers. Voldemort turned back to the papers and scanned the headlines for the thousandth time. "ORPHANAGE CARETAKER VICTIM OF AXE MURDERER."

"POLICE OFFICER GREGORY HAMMIL FOUND DEAD; CID SUSPECTS CONNECTION TO LAST MONTH'S AXE MURDER IN WHITECHAPEL." Voldemort's twisted smile widened as he got to the magical publications. "MALFOY HEIR AND WIFE MURDERED AT HOME; SON LEFT WITH HALF-SISTER." "TEN SHOPKEEPERS FOUND MYSTERIOUSLY DEAD ON SAME NIGHT." "21-YR-OLD COED AMANDA BIRCH KILLED BY UNKNOWN ASSAILANT."

"I've really been getting around, haven't I?" Voldemort mused aloud. It was a wonder the magical community hadn't caught him yet, but just to make sure, he had decided to get started on his journey right after Mandy was out of the way. No one would think to come after him in Transylvania, and it was finally time for him to graduate into the world of the Dark Arts.

Voldemort reached under his seat and tugged out his trunk. He shuffled through his things, trying to find a book to read, and his hand connected with a small bundle of papers. Curiously, he drew it out, untied the string around it, and unfolded the papers. How could he have forgotten about these? These papers used to be the center of his world when he was a child. Voldemort's

eyes roved over the photograph of his mother and her best friend. He cocked his head, giving his mother an appraising look as though seeing her for the first time. She was quite pretty, he noticed--it was easy to tell where he'd gotten his good looks. How odd that he had forgotten all about this. He moved on to the letter, and as he read the first line he suddenly recalled how he had cried over this letter as a small child.

He skimmed the letter disdainfully, then shifted his eyes back over in the direction of the photograph. What a frightfully dull child he must have been, wasting hours reading and rereading that mushy old letter. Folding the letter back into a threefold, Voldemort noticed the name of the addressee written out in fancy, old-fashioned cursive. Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Voldemort suddenly laughed. No wonder he had had such trouble remembering it--this letter didn't even really belong to him.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle is dead, darling Mother," he whispered, holding the letter and the photograph in front of his face. There was no point in hanging onto this--sentimental letters from dead mothers to dead sons bore little use to him.

Voldemort crumpled the letter and the photograph, tying the old shoestring around the bundle for the last time. He tugged his window open lazily, waited a few moments, and threw the decrepit wad of papers out the window. The parcel landed in a ditch. Voldemort smiled to himself and leaned back in his seat.

In a day or two, the train would reach the coast, and he'd ferry across the Channel to the European mainland. After that, only time would tell.

"Tom Riddle is dead," the young man repeated, almost as though trying to reassure himself.

"I am Lord Voldemort."

FIN